

# ***Reconsidering Relativism and Intentionalism in Interpretation:***

***Donald Davidson, Hermeneutics, and Pragmatism***

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Academic dissertation to be publicly discussed, by due permission of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Helsinki in lecture hall 5, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 2009 at 12 o'clock

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Helsinki 11.9.2009

Kalle Puolakka

## Note Concerning Earlier Publications

I have used material from other publications of mine which have either been published already or are shortly forthcoming. These publications are:

“Literature, Ethics, and Richard Rorty’s Pragmatist Theory of Interpretation,” *Philosophia. Philosophical Quarterly of Israel*, Vol. 36 No. 1, 2008, 29-41.

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'But look' you might ask, 'why do you care about modules so much?  
You've got tenure; why don't you take off and go sailing?'...  
The thing is I *hate* relativism.  
I hate relativism more than I hate anything, excepting, maybe, fiberglass powerboats.

Jerry Fodor in 1985.

## Introduction

In the history of philosophy, relativism has hardly had any supporters. If anything, relativism has been considered a view that does not even deserve closer attention. This is because relativism has been assumed to run immediately into a problem that it cannot overcome. The objection that relativism has immediately be seen to face is usually referred to as the “self-refutation-argument,” whose earliest formulations can be found in both Plato and Aristotle. Their primary opponent was the sophist Protagoras, who claimed man to be the measure of all things. While Protagoras’ doctrine has lent itself to various interpretations, it has usually been regarded as the first formulation of relativism.<sup>1</sup> Plato and Aristotle rejected it on the grounds that it is self-refutive. For relativism to be a true doctrine, in fact, requires the existence of one claim whose truth is not relative at all, that is, the truth of relativism. Since by its internal principles relativism denies the possibility of such a truth, the view may be discarded on the grounds that it cannot even be formulated coherently. This sort of attitude is typical not only for historical figures of philosophy, for some contemporary philosophers still rely on the self-refutation argument when opposing relativism. According to Maria Baghramian, trust in its decisiveness is so strong particularly in circles of analytic philosophy that it has almost reached the status of “an article of faith.”<sup>2</sup>

Recently, a desire has, however, awakened in some philosophers to reopen the case of relativism, especially as that question concerns the ultimate standing of the self-refutation argument, Joseph Margolis’ “robust relativism” being a particularly good case in point. Usually, doubts concerning the decisiveness of this argument emerge from the fact that a relativistic attitude, that is, an attitude that is seen to embody a respect for other ways of thinking and that denies the possibility of closure in inquiry, has been agued to be more appropriate given the current state of the world, populated by frequent cultural and other sorts of conflicts. Relativism has, in other words, been considered a doctrine of open-mindedness. These motivations lying behind relativism point to the ways in which the question of relativism is tied to various social and cultural considerations, the issue, thus, no longer being “a local skirmish” between philosophers and sophists as in Ancient Greece, for it has truly reached “a planetary level,” as Margolis observes.<sup>3</sup> Given its topicality together with the

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<sup>1</sup> Baghramian (2004, 21-41).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. (136).

<sup>3</sup> Margolis (1995a, 28).

evidence constantly evolving around us that suggest commitment to some kind of relativistic attitude managing to take hold of the complexities our contemporary condition involves, it is understandable why many share Robert Nozick's view that the particular swiftness with which the self-refutation argument dispenses with relativism no longer seems a compelling way to argue against that doctrine. If anything, it just inspires a feeling of uneasiness.<sup>4</sup>

Commitment to some kind of relativistic outlook has been especially popular within recent art research, which has received its main methodological inspirations from contemporary hermeneutic and deconstructivist approaches to interpretation. However, the issue whether these accounts should be termed relativistic or not is, of course, a matter which involves various complex questions. What these approaches at least do share with different variants of relativism is that they are highly critical about the possibility of any kind of foundationalism and of attaining a privileged viewpoint on the world. A comment made by a lecturer in a course in art history I once attended serves as a good example of the character of this attitude, as well as an indication of how widely art research has been absorbed by its spirit. At the beginning of her lecture about modernist painting she remarked that because post-impressionist painters did not conceptualize themselves in terms of that concept, that concept being the product of later art historical research, what she was about to tell us was only "our" point of view on the subject she was shortly going to move on to. From the look she gave us, it became evident that she believed she had just revealed a profound fact of art historical explanation. For me, however, the stubborn, developing analytic philosopher, she had just basically fallen into every possible fallacy an analytic philosopher, particularly of the Davidsonian bent, can think of. One such fallacy was the scheme-content dualism and its derivative assumption that "our" reality is constructed from an uninterpreted reality which "our" schemes cut into various shapes and sizes.<sup>5</sup>

Relativism can be connected to another trend recent art research has been dominated by. This is the tradition which continues in the footsteps of the "the death of the author"-thesis, primarily associated with the views of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Although analytic autopsies attempting to show that the author has been declared dead for the wrong reasons have been made,<sup>6</sup> the coroner's report seems to have reached only a small group of art researchers.<sup>7</sup> That this kind of situation is still widely prevalent puts an observation made by

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<sup>4</sup> Baghramian (2004, 137).

<sup>5</sup> Donald Davidson has presented one of the most famous arguments against the idea of conceptual relativism according to which reality is relative to a scheme, Davidson denoting with the term "scheme" such factors as "ways of organizing experience," "individuals," "cultures," "periods" (Davidson 1984/1974, 183). One reason why Davidson finds conceptual relativism problematic is that it is plagued by an inner tension, for "different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability" (ibid. 184). Davidson's criticism against conceptual relativism is highly dependent on his account of charity as the condition of interpretation which I shall consider in chapter two.

<sup>6</sup> Lamarque (1990).

<sup>7</sup> My perspective on the contemporary dominance of the ideas springing from "the death of the author" might also be highly influenced by the current state of Finnish art research, where those ideas still widely prevail.

E.D. Hirsch about forty years ago into a peculiar light. As is well known, Hirsch was the most persistent defender of the idea that the author's intentions should have an essential role in interpretation at a time when skepticism concerning that view began to spread rapidly. It seems that already then, the intentionalist view of interpretation Hirsch's literary theory as a whole so eloquently defends gradually became the clear underdog, for Hirsch felt puzzled by the success that some approaches to interpretation had managed to achieve over "the sensible belief that a text means what its author meant."<sup>8</sup>

Now, if arguing for the close connection between intention and meaning were considered the mark of sanity, the only possible diagnosis of recent interpretive theory would most probably be "insane." This is because the assault against Hirsch's sensible belief had not even properly begun at the time when he wrote the words quoted above. In recent decades, the intentionalist thesis supported by Hirsch has been questioned from various vantage points; from new criticism to poststructuralism, from hermeneutics to pragmatism, as well as in such disparate fields as feminism and analytic philosophy.

The observation that intentionalist accounts of interpretation have been opposed time and time again in the past decades opens up an interesting connection that issue bears to the way the issue of relativism has been considered in the history of philosophy. Alasdair MacIntyre, in fact, draws a different conclusion from the continuous opposition relativism has met in the history of philosophy from the usual understanding. This particular twirl suggested by MacIntyre brings out the connection that I believe to obtain between the issues of intentionalism and that of relativism. In his view:

Nothing is perhaps a surer sign that a doctrine embodies some not-to-be-neglected truth than that in the course of the history of philosophy it should have been refuted again and again. Genuinely refutable doctrines only need to be refuted once.<sup>9</sup>

Since this study considers both the question of intentionalism and that of relativism, it deals with two often-refuted and discarded views. However, it ends up defending only one of these views, that is, the view that the author's intentions have an important role in interpretation, and by doing so this study, for its part, tries to steer the course of interpretation theory back to the path of sanity. In this respect, it takes the analysis provided by MacIntyre as a sign that perhaps it is not relativism, but intentionalism which embodies some neglected truths. In the case of the second question, this study extends the list of attempts to discard relativism, particularly in the context of interpretation. This study tries to achieve this in a

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Mahler once said that when the end of the world comes, he will move to Vienna, for everything arrives there 30 years late. If the end of the world had truly arrived at Mahler's lifetime, he should have moved to Finland after having spent those 30 years in Vienna, for by doing so he would have received at least an additional 15 years of life.

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch (1967, 1).

<sup>9</sup> MacIntyre (1985, 22). This quotation also serves as one of the mottos for Baghramian (2004).

more meaningful way than by trusting on the power of the self-refutation argument. By doing so it takes a similar kind of stand towards attempts to refute relativism solely on the basis of that argument, which is also at the heart of Nozick's, Margolis', and MacIntyre's respective accounts of relativism. By taking this kind of stand on the issue of relativism, I hope to do justice to the not-to-be-neglected truths that these major figures of contemporary philosophy have attributed to relativism. I believe, however, it is possible to accommodate them without relativistic implications.

The primary reason why I want to defend a view that the author's intentions are relevant for interpretation is basically the very same that led Hirsch to ascribe that kind of position to them in interpretation, that is, it is the best principle available for making sense of what the validity of interpretation, ultimately, amounts to. For Hirsch, the importance of the author's intentions is connected with the conditions he sees the very meaningfulness of criticism to require. In his view, without some kind of stable norm against which the merits of different interpretations can be comparatively evaluated, interpretive enterprises are in danger of losing their intellectual credibility. In Hirsch's words:

As soon as anyone claims validity for his interpretation (and few would listen to a critic who did not), he is immediately caught in a web of logical necessity. If his claim to validity is to hold, he must be willing to measure his interpretation against a genuinely discriminating norm, and the only compelling normative principle that has ever been brought forward is the old-fashioned ideal of rightly understanding what the author meant.<sup>10</sup>

Hirsch's account of the relationship between the meaningfulness of interpretive enterprise and the kinds of standards it must involve so that it is able to achieve intellectual credibility is shared by many. For example, Arthur Danto thinks that if interpretations are not required to be supported by pieces of evidence and reasons, interpretation becomes an activity that is no different from "seeing faces in clouds."<sup>11</sup> In fact, the contextual account of meaning implied by Danto's famous analysis of the role of the art world in our understanding of art has been seen to impose the kinds of constraints on interpretation that the meaningfulness of interpretation is precisely in need of. That is, since meanings are dependent on the theoretical atmosphere of the art world, there are historical constraints on the kinds of meanings artworks may embody at a particular time. Since the possible meanings artworks may possess are historically conditioned in this way, there are also constraints on interpretations, which seek to track what those meanings are. In other words, "the possible interpretations are constrained by the artist's location in the world, by when and where he lived, by what experiences he could have had."<sup>12</sup> This is not to deny that interpretations could not be potentially endless. However, for Danto, our incapacity to say the final word in some cases does not mean

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<sup>10</sup> Hirsch (1967, 26).

<sup>11</sup> Danto (1981, 130).

<sup>12</sup> Danto (1986, 45-46).

subsuming ourselves under a form of relativism, but it is merely a result of the trivial fact that relevant knowledge is simply “unattainable” in some cases.<sup>13</sup>

Then again, it is arguable that the constraints Danto’s account of the art world, ultimately, sets for interpretation falls short of providing a foundation for evaluating the merits of different interpretations in the way both Hirsch and Danto thinks the meaningfulness of any interpretive endeavor requires. This is because the contextualist constraints implied by Danto’s account, nevertheless, remain rather loose, and are thus unable to provide the kind of foundation Danto and Hirsch are after. That is, the standards it gives for interpretation remain, after all, so weak that they seem to be able to rule out only plainly absurd interpretations. An example would be, say, a nineteenth-century Russian opera, which dealt with a turning point in Russian history being interpreted as a description of the plan that led to Dimitri Medvedev’s election as the Russian president in 2008. Such an interpretation would be invalid on the terms implied by Danto’s analysis of the art world for the simple and trivial reason that the opera was composed before the peculiar understanding of democracy leading to Medvedev’s presidency arose in Russia. This kind of constraint, however, does not amount to very much.<sup>14</sup> If we, in other words, want to continue to talk about more and less valid interpretations, we must take another look at intentionalism, for contextualism seems to fail those of us who want to keep on talking about validity in interpretation.

For some time, analytic philosophers of art in particular have given another look at the question of the role of authorial intention in interpretation. However, the substantial defense of intentionalism I intend to carry out in this study will take its primary inspiration from another source, Donald Davidson. Given Davidson’s stature within late twentieth century analytic philosophy it is, in fact, strange how seldom his views on meaning, intention, and the holistic constitution of the human mind have been referred to in the discussion currently carried out in analytic aesthetics over the role of the author’s intentions in interpretation.<sup>15</sup> In those texts, where Davidson explicitly considers the problem of literary language and interpretation, he supports a view of interpretation which bears some significant similarities with modest forms of intentionalism which are currently popular within analytic philosophy of art. Davidson, for example, discusses at length the problem of Humpty Dumpty which modest intentionalists have also been preoccupied with, that is, the problem of how a view which otherwise construes a close relationship between meaning and intention is able to embrace the fact that the author cannot mean whatever he wishes. The ignorance towards Davidson’s views is noteworthy. Partly this is because Davidson discusses the same issues modest intentionalists have focused on. But there is also ignorance of the fact that some elements which are fundamental for Davidson’s philosophical views on meaning, interpretation, and the constitution of the human mind supplement the modest intentionalist

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. (66).

<sup>14</sup> Compare Iseminger (1996, 321).

<sup>15</sup> One exception is Stecker (2003, 12-14).

position on interpretation and overcome certain major criticisms which have been addressed against that view of interpretation. Initial support for this view will be provided in chapter two by comparing Davidson's way of accommodating the problem of Humpty Dumpty to an intentionalist view of interpretation with the replies which modest intentionalists have used to avoid their views from slipping into it. The defense of intentionalism drawing on Davidson's views will be extended in chapters three and four by taking up two approaches to interpretation which are fundamentally at odds with any form of intentionalism and by showing how a form of intentionalism built upon Davidson's views is able to meet the criticisms of intentionalism these approaches involve. The stage for the defense to be carried out in those chapters will be set in chapter one by a critical discussion of Joseph Margolis' "robust relativism," which is arguably the most systematic and convincing defense of a relativistic view of interpretation in recent years.

By choosing Davidson's work as a touchstone, the view of interpretation to be formulated in this study can be seen to lead philosophy of literature and interpretation in a direction that, in the eyes of many, should no longer be followed. John Gibson has, for example, insisted that these disciplines should stop drawing so heavily on ideas initially introduced in the context of philosophy of language, whose most influential figure is Davidson. Instead, in Gibson's view, what should be brought under closer investigation is precisely the way in which the interpretation of literature requires factors that are not accounted for by the resources provided by philosophy of language.<sup>16</sup> I think there is some truth to Gibson's claim, and I shall consider the notion of interpretation in more detail at the end of my study. Before that, however, I think we need to be clearer on how far philosophy of language is able to help us in grasping the constituent factors involved in our interactions with artworks, and I believe that precisely an investigation on the relevance of Davidson's work provides a more detailed picture of where the limits of philosophy of language with respect to the interpretation of art lie.

While Davidson's work has been virtually ignored in analytic aesthetics, its relevance for philosophy of interpretation and literature has already been considered in other contexts. The first, and, at the same time, most extensive investigation to date, is the anthology *Literary Theory after Davidson* (1993). In later writings, its editor Reed Way Dasenbrock has further considered the relationship of Davidson's work to literary theory. These have been collected in the book *Truth and Consequences* (2001). A third major source is the symposium "Davidson and Literary Understanding" comprising three articles which appeared in number two of the 26th volume of the journal *Philosophy and Literature* in 2002.

The way in which the relevance of Davidson's work on the philosophy of interpretation is unraveled in this study departs from the way it is addressed in these texts. This becomes apparent especially in the theories that I have chosen as the primary examples of approaches embodying a skeptical attitude towards the role of authorial intention in interpretation, namely

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<sup>16</sup> Gibson (2006, 443).

the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and the view of interpretation and literature contained in Richard Rorty's pragmatism. In the texts mentioned above, the views of these two philosophers are either not discussed at all, or they are discussed in relation to issues different from those I shall be concerned with here.

Especially the intentionalist critique contained in Rorty's work connects the question regarding the strength of an interpretive position to those factors which have motivated some philosophers to call into question the force of the criticism of relativism relying on the self-refutation argument. While perhaps managing to provide a more satisfactory account of validity than nonfoundationalist approaches to interpretation are able to, intentionalist theories should, nevertheless, be discarded, for they are unable to accommodate certain challenges that Rorty sees contemporary society posing for literature and literary theory.

The critiques of intentionalism, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, and Rorty's pragmatism do raise issues which for many suggest the need to commit to some kind of relativistic outlook. Relativism may, however, be considered a more fundamental and all-embracing issue than the question whether the author's intentions should have a role in interpretation or not. Now if the issue relativism truly is primary to the question of the relevance of authorial intention in interpretation, it would seem a futile attempt to develop a substantial intentionalist account of interpretation if that endeavor is not connected to a systematic discussion of relativism, and especially of the possible problems it may involve. For this reason, the first chapter of this thesis is devoted to a discussion of one of the most systematic defenses of relativism in recent years, Joseph Margolis' "robust relativism." That exposition, and especially the problems Margolis' defense of relativism is seen to be troubled by in it, can be seen as plowing the path for the intentionalist theory to be developed on Davidson's work in the latter parts of this thesis, as well as for the defense of that position on interpretation I intend to carry out there.

Contemporary philosophy has not only been marked by a growing skepticism towards the self-refutation argument, but another tendency which can be discerned is that many influential philosophers have to a growing extent begun to take inspiration from different philosophical traditions. In some cases, those philosophers whose work is characterized by this kind of element include some of the most important critics of the self-refutation argument, Margolis being a good example. To choose Davidson's views as a touchstone for an investigation of the philosophical problems related to interpretation allows one to extend this important trend. While it is unfair to accuse exclusively analytic philosophers for not appreciating other philosophical traditions, analytic philosophy of interpretation as it is currently carried out in analytic aesthetics could arguably be more responsive to the issues raised outside of its circles, such as in pragmatism and in hermeneutics.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In all fairness, it must be said that in analytic philosophy of art issues have been raised which it would be good for hermeneutic philosophers to take into consideration as well. From an analytic perspective, an eye-catching thing about hermeneutic approaches to interpretation is that in them no distinction tends to be made between

Although philosophical fox holes are still rather deep, especially Davidson's philosophy has emerged as an interface between the different front lines. Davidson's views, for example, ultimately formed the strongest influence that Rorty received from analytic philosophy, and Rorty found the five volumes that made up Davidson's collected papers "time bombs, on the library shelves," which he hoped would be "detonated sooner or later."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in recent years there has been a growing interest in investigating the ways in which some fundamental elements of Davidson's philosophical views overlap with those that are at the heart of hermeneutics, particularly Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. In this respect, to choose Davidson's views on language, mind, and meaning as starting points for developing a more systematic account of interpretation gives a possibility for crossing the barriers parts of contemporary philosophy still involve. There is I think a real need for such a crossing which the Davidsonian starting point provides. That is, given the topical questions related to interpretation that have been raised in some traditions, one cannot help but share Joseph Margolis' estimation of contemporary philosophy according to which "English language philosophy begins to appear unconvincing, defective, unresponsive to challenge, even isolationist."<sup>19</sup>

My ultimate reason for crossing philosophical boundaries is not, however, merely for the sake of lending an ear to the other, but, rather, because it is my belief that in the contexts in which I shall discuss Davidson's views in the following chapters, their effect will truly prove to be explosive. In recent years, the critical edge has usually been drawn from Continental inspired theories towards analytic philosophy. In chapter three of this study, in particular, that edge will be turned in the opposite direction. To quote Margolis again, "I admire the sense of rigor in the 'analytic' tradition, and I admire the large spirit of the Continental."<sup>20</sup> It is my belief that the rigorousness Davidson's theory brings to the discussion on interpretation and understanding is able to point out difficulties in theories drawing on Continental theories, without diminishing the expansive spirit characterizing those approaches.

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performative interpretation, that is, an interpretation of a work which, for example, happens through the performance of a piece of music, and interpretation of a literary work. See, for example, Gadamer (2004/1960, xxviii, 141, 157), Gadamer (1973/1960, xix, 141, 157), Palmer (1969, 119) and Warnke (1987, 53-54). Analytic philosophers of art have, in turn, drawn attention to some fundamental differences between these two activities and that even within the field of music it is important to distinguish between different forms of interpretation, that is, performative and critical. See, for example, Levinson (1993) and Kivy (2006).

<sup>18</sup> Rorty (2005).

<sup>19</sup> Margolis (1995a, 6).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



Arise! Arise! To me! Your master calls you, nameless one,  
primeval devil-woman! Rose of Hell! You were Herodias, and  
who else? Gundryggia there, Kundry here! Come here! Come  
hither, Kundry! Your master calls; obey!

Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, Act Two

## **I Does Joseph Margolis' Defense of Relativism Fall into an Impasse?**

Joseph Margolis has provided one of the most systematic and multifaceted defenses of relativism in recent years. While much less influential, it embodies ideas similar to those found in deconstructivist-inspired approaches to interpretation, whose influence within art research shows very little signs of deterioration. By putting those ideas into a more rigorous form, and by backing them up with detailed argumentation, Margolis' account can, however, be seen to establish the attitude towards interpretation it shares with deconstructivism on a more responsible foundation, that is, a formulation that, in Margolis' own words, is not in danger of committing "a logical disaster."<sup>21</sup>

The reason why I have chosen Margolis' theory from other possible options to consider the issue of relativism is because of the diversified manner with which it approaches the question. His theory does not shy away from controversial issues related to relativism, and by trying to show that relativism need not have incoherent consequences, Margolis meets a powerful tradition of philosophy head on. In his opinion, the self-refutation argument is far from being a settled issue. Margolis sees his formulation of relativism as having a universal scope, encompassing disciplines from the natural sciences to cultural studies, and in this chapter, Margolis' views are approached as far as they concern interpretation. The reason for this sort of focus is not only that it connects the themes to be considered in this chapter with issues relevant for this study as a whole, but also because it is a context where Margolis himself believes his account of relativism is most likely to strike a chord, and where it has the most likely prospects of uncovering certain neglected, fruitful possibilities. As Margolis explains, "relativism is hardly interesting, presented as an abstract possibility. It gains its standing by being put to use...."<sup>22</sup> The rewarding prospects Margolis attributes to relativism are connected to the justification of interpretive statements, that is, Margolis claims, for a variety of reasons to be specified below, that interpretive sciences would profit from being modeled in the kinds of terms his relativistic logic sees justification to involve.

An important element of Margolis' defense of relativism is a denial of a sharp distinction between first-order and second-order questions. First-order questions include questions of fact

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<sup>21</sup> Margolis (1995b, 32).

<sup>22</sup> Margolis (1999, 52).

addressed by the individual sciences, including the different disciplines in art research. Second-order questions include such questions as what should one take the ultimate nature of reality to be and what sorts of factors is our knowledge concerning it founded on. These have usually been thought to form the subject matter of philosophy.<sup>23</sup> By emphasizing that these two types of questions cannot be considered in isolation from one another, but, rather, that their relationship is itself a second-order question, Margolis' theory involves skepticism towards the possibility of "a first philosophy" that functions irrespective of first-order truths. This is an attitude towards philosophical questions that it shares with Quinean naturalism. However, against this train of thought Margolis claims that second-order questions, for example, those regarding the justification of knowledge claims cannot be reduced to or replaced with first-order causal questions regarding the reliability of our cognitive faculties, as they are in Quine's naturalistic epistemology.

The claim regarding the impossibility of distinguishing between first-order and second-order questions serves as a basis for two important tenets of Margolis' theory and the defense of relativism it involves. First, that there is no fundamental reason for thinking that reality must, ultimately, possess an invariant structure. Second, that it is possible to fall back on a relativistic logic in the legitimation of statements if the situation under consideration is considered to call for this sort of decision. Echoing Kant's famous formulation on the relationship between concepts and intuitions, Margolis writes, "first-order inquiries without second-order inquiries cannot but be blind; second-order inquiries without first-order inquiries cannot but be empty."<sup>24</sup> In other words, the way in which the nature of such concepts as "reality" and "knowledge" are approached cannot be carried out independently of what first-order truths one is willing to accept, but this discourse "is ineluctably constrained by, and relativized to, first-order discourse."<sup>25</sup>

An important part of Margolis' defense of relativism is his critique of a philosophical assumption he calls "archism." The belief that is typical for this conception is not really a view which may be attributed to a particular philosopher. Rather it is a supposition regarding the possibility of thought that, in Margolis' opinion, is shared by various philosophers from Aristotle to the early Wittgenstein. In fact, Margolis claims that a substantial part of the history of philosophy has been archist by nature, which is to say, the claim that reality must ultimately possess an invariant structure has been regarded as a necessary precondition for rational thought and meaningful inquiry, and, consequently, it has been thought that no adequate philosophical account of knowledge or of truth can be irreconcilable with this principle.

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<sup>23</sup> Margolis (1995a, 16-17).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. (17).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. (93).

Margolis sees his argument against the assumption he refers to with the term “archism” as a form of “conceptual bet” against a supposed “conceptual unavoidability.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, Margolis’ critical account of archism is motivated by the belief that no one has ever managed to show that the possibility of meaningful discourse truly presupposes a commitment to the archist’s thesis, and that discourses must be constrained by such factors the conforming to which the archist introduces as necessary, such as to the principle of noncontradiction. Margolis challenges the alleged authority of this position by outlining an an-archist philosophy, which maintains “that reality may be a flux, that is, lacking invariant structure or lacking necessarily invariant structure, and that rational thought need not invoke such invariances.”<sup>27</sup>

Here we see how Margolis’ account of the relationship between first-order and second-order questions is intended to pave the way for his rejection of archism and to lend initial support for the version of relativism he ultimately offers. There is no necessary reason to commit to archism on the second-order level, but that question itself is dependent on considerations that arise from the first-order level. The reasons that lead Margolis to reject archism in this case are in many respects similar to those that motivate philosophers such as Nozick to insist on the need to reassess the standing of the self-refutation argument against relativism, that is, “the insistence on fixity is simply invalid and profoundly inappropriate given the human condition.”<sup>28</sup>

For Margolis, that condition is also essentially historical, the claim that “thinking is a history,” in fact, serving as a postulate for one of his most important works.<sup>29</sup> As David Carr so perceptively observes, for Margolis, “history is not so much a problem as a way of redefining all the other problems.”<sup>30</sup> Acknowledging the historical nature of human thought gives Margolis another reason for rejecting archism, for by insisting that the nature of reality is ultimately invariant, the doctrine overlooks precisely this element of the human condition. Moreover, the conceptual resources through which inquiry is conducted are historically changing and, hence, contingent. Margolis’ view of historicity, thus denies the possibility of grounding discourses and the principles governing them on an invariant foundation. In other words, policies dominated by the archist spirit proceed on the questionable assumption that reality has “a determinate structure entirely apart from, entirely unaffected, by the intrinsic conditions of human knowledge, understanding, and inquiry”<sup>31</sup> and that we would “possess... an assured ability to discern the real properties of the world as it is *independent* of our

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. (25).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. (27).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. (3).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid (165).

<sup>30</sup> Carr (1997, 139).

<sup>31</sup> Margolis (1995a, 30).

inquiries....”<sup>32</sup> That is to say, there cannot be the sort of cognitive privileged position with regard to the nature of reality archism assumes.

## **1. Overcoming the Self-Refutation Argument**

Once the force of the archist supposition has been undermined by the above factors, Margolis believes that the elements begin to emerge on the basis of which the supposed definitiveness of the self-refutation argument may be questioned. Simultaneously, the prospects for formulating a coherent view of relativism open up. In Margolis’ opinion, the force of the self-refutation argument is by no means independent of a commitment to the archist thesis, but, rather, its ultimate standing is wholly dependent on whether the necessity of archism is accepted or not. The problem, as Margolis sees it, has been that of “disconnecting logic and metaphysics.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, the self-refutation argument seems compelling only because certain formal principles, such as the principle of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle, are antecedently thought to lend support to archism.<sup>34</sup> However, if there is a possibility of rejecting archism, that is, of rejecting the claim that the denial of fixed essences leads to incoherence, the aforementioned principles lose the kind of force they have been thought to possess.

The consequence that Margolis draws from his criticism of archism is that “it is very difficult to suppose that the assignment of truth-values to statements alleged to be about the way the world is is altogether independent of our views of the way the world is.”<sup>35</sup> That is to say, assessments of truth-claims do not function irrespective of what we take the part of the world under dispute to be like, i.e., what is its ontological nature. This sort of connection between alethic questions, that is, questions related to the ascription of truth-values, and ontic questions transforms the terms with which the validity of those principles governing our critical practices is to be assessed. In particular, it calls for a re-evaluation of the position of bivalence.<sup>36</sup> This is because if “the choice of truth values (or truth-like values) assigned, as a matter of policy or principle, to any sector of inquiry is a function... of what we take to be the nature of the domain in question,” there are grounds for committing to bivalence, only if it is seen to result from the ontological nature of that domain.<sup>37</sup> Yet, if there is a possibility of rejecting archism, there are no necessary, unchanging reasons that force us to commit to bivalence in inquiry.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. (35).

<sup>34</sup> Margolis (1995b, 71).

<sup>35</sup> Margolis (1995a, 41).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. (64).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. (65)

In place of a bivalent logic Margolis outlines a relativistic logic for the assessment of truth-claims. With a relativistic logic Margolis means “a many-valued logic that, relative to some interpreted domain of discourse, admits as compatible, those constative claims that would... be incompatibles in a bivalent logic.”<sup>38</sup> By replacing the symmetrical values of “true” and “false” with weaker values such as “plausible,” “reasonable,” and “apt” that do not bear the kind of mutually exclusive relationship to each other as the values used in a bivalent logic, relativistic logic is able to justify incompatible statements. In other words, even if two statements were incompatible with each another, this still does not imply that one of them must necessarily be discarded. Despite the fact that this kind of logic relinquishes bivalence, Margolis is firm that a resort to this sort of logic in justification does not lead to an “anything goes” attitude which is in danger of falling to the view that any conception and judgment is as good as any other. Even if statements were judged in accord with weaker values than those of “true” and “false,” there still remains the possibility of comparing the mutual validity of statements adequately enough and even disconfirming certain statements as false. This is possible even in the case where “truth” would no longer apply.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, considerations concerning the coherence and consistency of arguments arise with the same kind of force in the sort of relativistic logic preferred by Margolis as in a bivalent one. This assumption also provides the kind of relativistic logic Margolis outlines the opportunity of disconfirming such statements an anything goes attitude would arguably accept.<sup>40</sup>

An important thing to note especially as we are concerned with the issue of the coherence of relativism is that the purpose of Margolis’ relativism is not to provide a definition of truth, but to clarify the foundation of the assignment of truth-values. This fact becomes apparent from a distinction Margolis makes between a view he calls “relationalism” and his own robust relativism. While the former holds that truth is defined relatively to, say, a sector of inquiry, a scientific paradigm, or a given culture, robust relativism simply involves the claim that truth-value assignments are constrained by ontic and epistemic factors. According to Margolis, it is the former version of relativism that philosophers from Plato onwards have had in mind when discussing relativism and which they have considered self-refutive. Acknowledging the incoherence of relationalism, however, is of no consequence for the acceptability of robust relativism.<sup>41</sup> Margolis explains the difference between the two versions of relativism as follows:

In short, in accord with the viable form of relativism, ‘true’ simply means ‘true’! *Truth-claims* remain subject to ‘epistemic’ and ‘ontic’ constraints. ‘True’ means ‘true’, but whether relativistically construed or not, the assignment of truth-values remains subject to the vagaries of ‘L’ and ‘W’ and so on. That is, ‘relationalists’ hold

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. (67)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. (68).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. (68); Margolis (1999, 49).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. (53-55).

(by self-referential paradox) that ‘true’ means ‘true-in- $L_k$ ’; ‘robust relativists’ hold that ‘true’ simply means ‘true’ as it standardly does in bivalent logics.<sup>42</sup>

So, to recapitulate. The point is that Margolis’ robust relativism does not claim that truth is relative in the sense that something could be true in one context without being true in another. Instead, it maintains that the way in which truth or truth like-values are assigned to statements is dependent on possible epistemic and ontic constraints. To emphasize the constraints that especially ontic elements pose for justification is important for Margolis’ relativistic theory of interpretation.

## ***2. The Ontology of Cultural Entities and Relativism in Interpretation***

Margolis’ rejection of archism and the formulation of a relativistic logic to which it leads proposes an approach to interpretation according to which there are no necessary reasons why even incompatible interpretive statements about artworks and, say, about historical events could not be simultaneously accepted. He gives further support for committing to this sort of relativistic logic in justification by developing an ontological theory of cultural entities that highlights their invariant nature. Here Margolis’ view that the logic of justification cannot be separated from ontic questions becomes apparent. Since “it is impossible to disjoin the account of the nature or logic of interpretation from one’s theory of the nature of what it is that may or must be submitted to interpretation,”<sup>43</sup> it is reasonable to commit to bivalence only if the ontological nature of interpreted entities is of such a kind that it can support such a commitment. The account of cultural entities formulated by Margolis is meant to demonstrate that their ontological nature is indeterminate to the degree that the validity of interpretive statements cannot be approached in terms of bivalence, but that some form of relativistic logic is better suited to account for their justification.

Margolis regards cultural entities as “physically embodied and culturally emergent entities.”<sup>44</sup> This claim is meant to capture their distinctive ontological nature. While the existence of cultural entities does presuppose some form of physical existence, their properties cannot be reduced to the physical properties of the entity in which they are embodied. Among these sorts of beings Margolis includes not only such things as artworks and other cultural products, but human “selves” as well. The notion of emergence is widely used in philosophy, but in Margolis’ theory of cultural entities it acquires a fundamental position that is rarely given to it in contemporary philosophy any more. He has explained his

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<sup>42</sup> Margolis (1995a, 69-70). Italics Margolis.

<sup>43</sup> Margolis (1995b, 21).

<sup>44</sup> Margolis (1999, 68).

understanding of emergence in various ways, but I think the following quotation sums it up effectively:

By “emergent,” then, I mean the obvious empirical fact that human beings readily acquire language and culture and are literally altered by succeeding thus, and also the ontologically explanatory notion that their characteristic activities now – science, politics, morality, art, [etc.], are made possible only by changes in their very “natures”. They are literally transformed by their enculturation, emerge as uniquely hybrid beings – selves – irreducibly “second-natured” by their *sui generis* competences.<sup>45</sup>

To be sure, biological reality is characterized by a kind of emergence as well, in the sense that certain higher level properties of biological organisms cannot be reduced to the properties of their parts. Despite this similarity between cultural and biological reality, Margolis nevertheless sees a crucial difference between the two. This especially concerns the elements on which the emergence is founded. That is to say “the conditions... of the emergence of the biological and of the cultural are utterly different from each other.”<sup>46</sup> The decisive difference between the two is that cultural emergence involves a kind of reciprocity between individual entities and the specific level of reality to which they belong, that is, a kind of “hermeneutic circle” between part and whole, which is absent in the case of biological emergence. Unlike in the case of biological entities, the emergent properties of cultural entities are essentially context-sensitive and hence may change as those entities are inserted into different contexts.

Since this sort of view on emergence denies that cultural entities possess invariant, determinate natures, it gives further support to commit to the kind of relativistic theory of interpretation Margolis supports. Due to their “permeable” and “porous” nature, the properties characteristic of cultural entities are alterable through interpretation.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, for Margolis, interpretation is essentially an imputational enterprise, that is, it is not an activity that discovers the properties cultural objects possess independently of our ways of approaching them, but, rather, different properties emerge with regard to different readings and interpretations.

Margolis refers to these culturally emergent properties as “Intentional,” a notion that is meant to collect a wide variety of elements related to language and culture together.<sup>48</sup> The conditions of Intentionality serve as yet another distinctive mark of cultural emergence that separates it from biological emergence. Because of the porous nature of cultural entities, that is, the way in which they receive new properties through interpretation and through the effect

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<sup>45</sup> Margolis (2005, 617).

<sup>46</sup> Margolis (1995a, 209).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. (252).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. (213) Margolis lists, for example, the following things under the heading of the “Intentional”: “lingual” meaning, significance, signification, intensions, signs, symbols, reference, representations, expressions, rhetorical functions, semiotic import, rule-like regularities, purposes, propositional attitudes, intentions, and the like” (ibid.).

of history, in cultural emergence the character of the emergent properties is highly affected by human intervention. A similar kind of effective factor is absent in the case of biological emergence. In other words, unlike ants and sea shells, “man makes and remakes himself and his cultural world.”<sup>49</sup> “The *reality* of our cultural world is inseparable from human life and intervention....”<sup>50</sup> This is not to deny the biological or non-Intentional origins of the human species. However, it points to the specific way in which Margolis construes the relationship between these realms. That is, while it is, indeed, so that “physical nature is... ontically prior to human culture, cultural world is (in its turn) epistemically prior to the physical.”<sup>51</sup> Epistemical priority here denotes precisely the fact that our conceptual resources are culturally formed and develop historically, and because of this there is no possibility of grasping how reality is in itself independent of them.

For Margolis, “whatever is historical may be directly altered by the historical process, by interpretation and by intentional action.”<sup>52</sup> Hence, the meaning of, say, *Hamlet* is not determined by the author’s intention or any other invariant factor that remains the same throughout the history of the work’s reception, but “its meaning is heuristically schematized in the intersection between our present power of reading, and what, from that evolving perspective, we posit as its collected past.”<sup>53</sup> That is, “the meaning of *Hamlet* is, now, a function of how we reconstruct the history of past interpretations.”<sup>54</sup> These quotations bring out in an apt way the specific reciprocity Margolis considers cultural emergence involves; the Intentional properties of cultural entities change, because people change, cultural entities, thus, lacking determinate natures, are nothing but “histories.”

A particular reason that makes Margolis’ defense of relativism so admirable is that he admits that relativistic views do, indeed, involve problems that need to be overcome before they may be further applied. One such is the following: if cultural entities are allowed to change in the drift of history, how is it possible that we can continue to speak of the same entity, given that the identity of that entity is in constant change? Or to put it in more technical terms, how can referential unicity be guaranteed under change of identity?

In Margolis’ opinion, the key to overcoming this problem lies in the separation of questions concerning the individuation of an entity from questions concerning the constitution of its identity. That is, the possibility of individuating a particular entity as the same does not presuppose that that entity must be thought to possess an inconstant nature.<sup>55</sup> For Margolis, and for other pragmatist-inspired theorists, such as Richard Shusterman, the individuation of cultural entities is based on the inherited cultural practices that allow the career of a given

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<sup>49</sup> Margolis (1995b, 90).

<sup>50</sup> Margolis (2000, 116). Italics Margolis.

<sup>51</sup> Margolis (1999, 96).

<sup>52</sup> Margolis (1995b, 103).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. (49).

<sup>54</sup> Margolis (2000, 126).

<sup>55</sup> Margolis (1995b, 35).



cultural entity to have the kind of unicity that individuation requires. Observing this fact demonstrates that, ultimately, cultural reality serves a dual role. That is, by both establishing the possibility of individuating cultural entities and by transforming their nature, cultural reality simultaneously serves as the ground for individuation and as the source of change. The individuation of cultural entities is, in other words, a form of “numerical identity through change.”<sup>56</sup>

So, Margolis’ account of cultural entities depicts a relationship between unity and change similar to that embodied in Klingor’s description of Kundry in the motto at the beginning of this chapter. After having laughed at Christ at the foot of the cross, Kundry was doomed to wander around the world in different forms, without receiving a relief in death that she so piteously craves for in *Parsifal*. Although during her wanderings Kundry has received many forms, each time that Klingsor calls Kundry to seduce the Knights of the Grail through some bizarre stroke of magic, the seducer is every time one and the same. In the case of cultural entities, however, no such magic is required.

Margolis writes that “admitting the ontic distinction of artworks goes a long way toward ensuring the plausibility of relativism.”<sup>57</sup> Now, if one recalls Margolis’ insistence that questions concerning justification cannot be separated from ontic questions concerning the possible ontological peculiarities of a given domain of reality, one sees how this sort of account of cultural entities is intended to persuade one to commit to a relativistic logic in interpretation. There is reason to invoke bivalence when accounting for the justification of statements only if the ontological nature of the domain under dispute is of such a kind as to be able to support such a commitment. Since the identity of cultural entities is porous and in constant transformation, this sort of decision does not seem reasonable in this case.

### **3. Is There Really a Need to Fall Back on a Relativistic Logic?**

The ultimate complexity of Margolis’ defense of relativism has not always been evident in the literature. It is for this reason that I have spent some time spelling out the intricacies of his argument. Now it is time to assess the convincingness of that defense. I shall address it from two angles, the first of which will be carried out in this section. Here, I will take up that part of Margolis’ defense in which a bivalent-logic is considered ill-suited for use in the legitimation of interpretive claims made of artworks. This approach supports the view that a relativistic logic is, instead, more capable of accounting for the complexities that activity involves. The kind of relationship between first-order and second-order questions drawn by Margolis shows that one’s response to the question regarding which logic to prefer in legitimation affects the question what sort of view of cultural entities should one hold. As

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. (82).

<sup>57</sup> Margolis (1999, 85).

Margolis explains the relationship between these two issues, “if (for argument’s sake) the interpretation of artworks favored a relativistic logic (as I believe it does), then we should have to ask ourselves how that might be reflected in our theory of what an artwork is....”<sup>58</sup> For Margolis, this assertion suggests that precisely the kind of ontological theory of culture supported by him must be developed, for the view of emergence that theory includes manages to explain the reality of all those properties that relativistic logic allows to be imputed to the object.

However, what I take this interrelatedness perceptible in the different parts of Margolis’ defense of relativism to imply is that if a bivalent logic is not, after all, as ill-suited as Margolis claims it to be, the support Margolis draws for a relativistic outlook on interpretation from his theory of cultural entities is simultaneously undermined. This is because if it is indeed so that when reflecting on “what an artwork is” we must take into account the logic we want interpretation to follow, as Margolis insists, his own theory of cultural entities seems to lose ground when the use of relativistic logics in justification appears less compelling. That is, if our theory of what an artwork is must reflect our view of the logic of justification, does not a possibility for developing an ontological theory of culture without relativistic consequences open up if we reject a commitment to the kind of relativistic logic in justification outlined by Margolis. What that theory might look like will be outlined in the next section. The rest of this section, however, is devoted to bringing out factors that I believe speak against favoring the relativistic logic Margolis’ defense offers in place of a bivalent logic.

Support for the view that the relativistic logic developed by Margolis should, indeed, be rejected, and that there is no immediate need to relinquish bivalent logic may be drawn from an examination of one particular case of interpretive disagreement. In this case, that disagreement concerns the significance of the character of Siegfried within Richard Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen*. Roger Scruton has considered him to be the most important character of the whole cycle,<sup>59</sup> while Philip Kitcher & Richard Schacht have not only argued that it is Wotan who holds this position, but that it is, in fact, odd how insignificant a role Siegfried, in the end, occupies in Wagner’s work once a proper grasp of the work’s structure has been worked out.<sup>60</sup>

Now, because this case involves two interpretations that are almost in contradiction with each other, it serves as an illuminating example in which to consider the convincingness of Margolis’ claim that relativistic logic is better suited for use in legitimating interpretive statements than a bivalent one. It seems that a Margolisian analysis of the case presented could offer two possible ways of coping with the disagreement apparent in it. First, by appealing to the fact that since there is no ultimate reason to reject the use of relativistic logic, Margolis could offer reasons to the effect that such a logic should be favored in this case.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. (71).

<sup>59</sup> Scruton (2003).

<sup>60</sup> Kitcher & Schacht (2004, 185-196).

Moreover, because within this logic even incompatible statements can be judged valid, there is no need to discard either interpretation, for both interpretations present in the case may be simultaneously accepted.

Before coming to this solution in more detail, it is worth noting that another kind of solution is possible for Margolis as well. Although his primary aim is to develop a relativistic logic within which even incongruent claims may be validated, Margolis nevertheless wants to leave room for the possibility that this kind of logic is, after all, able to retain sufficient normative bite to judge which interpretations may be considered invalid. That is, in Margolis' opinion, even though a decision to favor a relativistic logic does mean that "truth no longer applies," that value being replaced with such weaker values as "apt" and "reasonable," it does not imply that claims could no longer "be disconfirmed, as false."<sup>61</sup>

If relativistic logics are, after all, able to account for the possibility that certain interpretations are invalid, what sort of basis can it introduce for this disconfirming? One factor which Margolis relies on is the historically emergent character of cultural entities. That is, since the character of a given cultural entity is determined by the history of its interpretations, that history may be considered to create, if not explicit constraints, at least a kind of touchstone for present interpretations, through which their character is formed. Margolis writes: "*Responsible* interpretation must to some extent consult the prior history of a work's interpretation, but it need not attempt to build linearly on that history or even know the whole of it."<sup>62</sup> In his account of Margolis' relativism, David Carr also draws attention to the important position history occupies in Margolis' attempt to avoid a slippage to an anything-goes attitude. This has usually been considered that form of relativism which is incapable of discarding any statements or interpretations whatsoever. Even though cultural entities do lack a determinate nature, which stays the same in different contexts, this does not mean that interpretations begin from scratch. Cultural entities are not *tabula rasas*, so to speak, which are just waiting for interpretation to make their mark on them, for past interpretations and tradition have already made their imprints from which present strokes begin. That is to say "narrative provides the appropriate, and appropriately contingent, ordering principle. Human actions, human events, persons are such that we can tell stories about them. That's all we need to know."<sup>63</sup>

The way reliance on history is here presumed to allow Margolis to reject one of the interpretations of the character of Siegfried presented above is to consider one of them irresponsible, for example by claiming that in that interpretation the past interpretations of *The Ring* are not properly taken into account. Yet, this kind of reliance on the career of *The Ring* does not seem to be able to provide the resources that Margolis is in need of in this context. This is because, and this is a point that will be important also for the critical account

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<sup>61</sup> Margolis (1995a, 68).

<sup>62</sup> Margolis (1999, 91) My italics.

<sup>63</sup> Carr (1997, 143).

of Gadamer's hermeneutics presented in chapter three, traditions just do not exhibit the kind of unified character that the role here ascribed to them by Margolis would require. That is, if tradition already contains interpretations, which may depart significantly from one another, how can a tradition of this kind provide the criteria for comparing the validity of different contemporary interpretations? So, if the solution suggested by Margolis to the presented case would be that one of the proposed views of the character of Siegfried should be rejected, that solution is not available for him, unless he appeals to other factors than the history of interpretations of *The Ring* in order to discard one of the proposed interpretations. If both interpretations are, in other words, equally responsible, Margolis' robust relativism is unable to discard one of them.

The inability of Margolis' robust relativism to formulate adequate grounds for discarding one of the interpretations of *The Ring* need not severely weaken his insistence that a relativistic logic should, after all, be favoured in interpretation, for he could also propose that both of the interpretations should be accepted as a solution to that case. Since favoring a relativistic logic need not have incoherent consequences, as it can ultimately be used to validate incompatible interpretations, Margolis could solve the case by maintaining that there is no need to discard either of the interpretations, because they can both be considered valid within the kind of relativistic logic he has developed. For Margolis, this solution should be favored in cases where it is likely to be able to take hold of the legitimative question under dispute in a more satisfactory way, whatever that might include, than a bivalent one.

The question that now becomes relevant is whether the disagreement between the interpretations offered by Scruton and Kitcher & Schacht is such a case. Should these interpretations be assigned weaker truth-values, Scruton's being apt and Kitcher's & Schacht's reasonable, for example? One case in which accepting both interpretations would be a solution to the case of incompatible interpretations which we would be willing to make, is where both interpretations are well argued for, draw on a rich and wide evidential basis. It also includes cases where they may both be considered responsible because they take into account other proposed interpretations and discuss their merits. Precisely in a disagreement between interpretations, which are characterized by these qualities, no evident criterion suggests itself for discarding one of them in a rigid manner. In these kinds of cases we might be inclined to say that both interpretations should be sustained, even though they diverge from each other on some essential points.

Both Scruton's and Kitcher's & Schacht's respective interpretations are characterized by the kinds of features mentioned above. So, a likely option for Margolis to solve this dispute would be to accept both interpretations, and to conclude that our feeling for the need to decide between the two is merely the result of our being brought up in a philosophical atmosphere dominated by the archist spirit.

Now, even though this kind of solution to interpretive disagreement, indeed, embodies those values related to plurality and contingency, whose embracing has served as one of the

primary motivations for Margolis to develop a relativistic theory of interpretation in the first place, some other factors may be raised that speak against the utilization of a relativistic logic in tackling interpretive disagreements, such as the one presented above. Margolis writes that “wherever we want to admit ‘incongruent’ truth-claims, we need only fall back to a relativistic logic.”<sup>64</sup> But who is this “we,” who is supposed to make that decision? Are Scruton and Kitcher & Schacht themselves among them? I have not found in Margolis’ work, which is vast, an explicit answer to this question. Some fundamental elements of Margolis’ theory of relativism, such as the view of the relationship between first-order and second-order questions it involves, however, give support for the view that Scruton and Kitcher & Schacht, and other Wagner scholars should have a hearing when the decision which sort of logic to favor is made. That is, the question which logic to prefer in justification is no longer a matter that merely concerns philosophers, but now that Margolis has uncovered the shaky ground on which previous views on the incoherence of relativism have been laid, art researchers can take up Margolis’ recommendation if they feel the need for it.

However, I am somewhat skeptical as to whether Scruton and Kitcher & Schacht would themselves be willing to rely on a relativistic logic in tackling the disagreement apparent in their interpretations. Kitcher and Schacht have, for example, written a book-length study on *The Ring* in which it is meticulously argued that scene two of the second act of *Valkyrie* is the most pivotal one in the cycle, a view from which their assessment of the position of Siegfried follows. Would they be prepared to accept an interpretation of the same work which departs from their own on certain pivotal points? What sense is there to embark on a project of explaining one of the most gigantic works in the history of any art form with an attitude that the force of those arguments one gives in support of one’s interpretation is so weak that one is, nevertheless, required to accept an interpretation which is at odds with one’s own? What kind of critical discussion could be carried out between Scruton and Kitcher & Schacht if that dispute were guided by these kinds of assumptions? In this respect, I do not think that the first-order disagreement between these interpretations of *The Ring* calls for the use of a relativistic logic when their ultimate justification is considered.

Some further support may be given for the assessment that the disagreement apparent in Scruton’s and Kitcher & Schacht’s interpretations does not imply a need to use a relativistic logic. In support of his interpretation Scruton relies on the author’s intention, that is, he thinks Wagner intended Siegfried to be the most pivotal character in *The Ring*.<sup>65</sup> Now, this is an interesting observation, given that the general goal of this thesis is to develop a systematic defense of intentionalist approaches to interpretation. The more interesting observation, however, is that despite the fact that I have this goal, I, nevertheless, believe Scruton’s interpretation is incorrect, because certain factors speak against the assessment of Siegfried’s position it involves. Now, if such factors do exist, and if they can be relied on in the attempt

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<sup>64</sup> Margolis (1999, 53).

<sup>65</sup> Scruton (2003, 162).

to decide between different interpretations, it seems that we have arrived at yet another reason for rejecting the use of relativistic logic.

For example, one piece of evidence that speaks against Scruton's interpretation is the structure which the composition process of *The Ring* ultimately took. To be sure, initially Wagner had no intention of composing a work bearing the structure of *The Ring* as we now know it, for that ultimately grew from an idea Wagner had of composing an individual opera, *Siegfrieds Tod*. In this piece, the story of Siegfried was indeed intended to form the central part of the plot. The way in which the composition process of *The Ring* developed since then, however, no longer offers support for Scruton's claim. For once Wagner, realizing that he had to compose another opera in order to make the present one he was composing understandable to the viewer, managed to complete the whole tetralogy, the story of Wotan had removed Siegfried as the figure around which and through whose actions the plot of *The Ring* develops.<sup>66</sup>

Now, if one accepts that a reference to pieces of evidence similar to the one I just invoked manages to call into question the accuracy of Scruton's interpretation, at least as it concerns the position of Siegfried, then is it not indeed the case that the need for assessing the validity of interpretations in terms of a relativistic logic is not as pressing as Margolis sets it out to be. That is, if it is truly possible to provide evidence that can speak against a given interpretation as strongly as I think the composition process of *The Ring* speaks against Scruton's view of Siegfried, why should we feel there is a need to validate incompatible interpretations in this case?

Margolis could, of course, reply that a commitment to a relativistic logic does not rule out the possibility of relying on these kinds of items of evidence in certain contexts to decide which interpretation to prefer. If this indeed were possible, it would, in fact, simultaneously give that logic the kind of normative bite it was accused of lacking above. However, does not this solution come with a price? That is, if a relativistic logic can ultimately give certain pieces of evidence the kind of strength which was attributed to the composition process of *The Ring* above, does anything relativistic in that kind of logic any longer remain. The initial motivation for Margolis to develop a coherent form of relativistic logic was to make the simultaneous justification of incompatible interpretations possible. Now, if that kind of logic can simultaneously give grounds for rejecting Scruton's interpretation, it seems that that logic has significantly departed from the one Margolis initially set out to develop.

Ultimately, Margolis seems to face a dilemma. On the one hand, even though he thinks that relativistic logic may be used in validating incompatible interpretations by favoring weaker positive values over the almighty "true," it is nevertheless able to disconfirm certain claims. I argued that at least the reliance on the tradition of interpretations, which Margolis

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<sup>66</sup> For example, Bryan Magee writes that "Wagner's expansion of his original dramatic conception has had the effect of dethroning Siegfried from the position of *The Ring's* main character and replacing him with Wotan" (Magee 2001, 105).

introduces as one means for building normative bite within a relativistic logic, does not manage to give the kinds of constraints on the validity of interpretations Margolis is in need of in this context. On the other, the solution to the case of interpretive disagreements, which argued that both interpretations should be accepted, was considered a less preferable option than Margolis assumes. It was also observed that Margolis could perhaps rely on factors similar to those invoked, such as the composition process of *The Ring*, in order to make a decision between the two interpretations possible. That solution, however, deprives the logic Margolis wants us to prefer in justifying interpretive claims from any clear relativistic content, this solution thus being at least to some extent at odds with Margolis' general aims and ambitions.

#### **4. Could Supervenience, After All, Work?**

I shall now turn to the second strand of Margolis' defense of relativism, which claims that the indeterminate nature of cultural entities renders bivalent logic an unsuitable framework in which to consider the validity of interpretive claims. It seems that there is a fairly easy reply to this defense; develop an ontological theory of culture that does not lay a stress on the indeterminate nature of cultural entities, this kind of theory thus being without such relativistic consequences that Margolis' version implies.

The response to Margolis' ontological argument for cultural relativism, however, is not as simple as might initially appear. This is because Margolis supports his version of cultural realism by claiming that the majority of theories currently found in analytic aesthetics cannot provide the resources for a viable form of cultural realism,<sup>67</sup> an insufficiency that in Margolis' opinion especially plaques Arthur Danto's philosophy of art.<sup>68</sup> This is a void that Margolis' cultural ontology, with its emphasis on the emergent nature of culture, is intended to fill. That is to say, since Margolis' account of cultural ontology is the most viable form of cultural realism in the field, and since that involves a view of cultural entities stressing their indeterminate and alterable nature, there is no other option but to bite the bullet, and acknowledge a need to fall back on a relativistic logic in justification.

Here is where the argument against the use of relativistic logics presented in the previous section comes into play. My claim there was that given the relationship between first-order and second-order questions lying at the heart of Margolis' defense of relativism, a successful response to Margolis' proposal to frame the issue of legitimation in terms of relativistic logics does not leave the ontological argument for relativism unaffected. To my mind the significant implication the rejection of relativistic logics has is that it alters the terms with which the adequacy of a theory of cultural realism is to be assessed. As was indicated, Margolis maintains that our view of what an artwork is must reflect our view of the logic of

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<sup>67</sup> Margolis (1989).

<sup>68</sup> Margolis (1998).

justification. Another way in which Margolis formulates the interrelatedness between these issues is that “we must invent the ontologies we need... seeking only to make them plausible and coherent and serviceable for our best analyses,”<sup>69</sup> which to my mind is to say that if we decide to use relativistic logics in justification, we need to explain the realism of all those properties that kind of logic allows to be imputed to the cultural entity during its career. The emphasis laid on the emergent character of cultural entities in Margolis’ cultural ontology indicates how this may be achieved.

However, if the issue of ontology bears this kind of relationship to the question of relativism, and if, in fact, there is no pressing need to fall back on a relativistic logic, does not this imply that a possibility opens up for developing an alternative ontological theory of cultural realism to Margolis’ cultural emergence, and more importantly, one which does not involve relativistic implications for interpretation? Here is the impasse I sense Margolis’ theory falls into. That is, if the argument for the use of a relativistic logic appealing to the claim that legitimated questions related to interpretation exhibit an apparent need for it is called into question, it seems that the ontological argument no longer supports relativism as strongly as before. This is because the negative conclusion regarding the use of a relativistic logic alters the terms with which the adequacy of an ontological theory of culture is to be considered. In other words, if the ontological theory need no longer take the acceptance of a relativistic logic into account, what one requires from an ontological theory seems to alter, that is, it no longer has to be assessed on the basis of how it is able to account for the realism of all those properties relativistic logic allows to claim about the object.

As we saw, Margolis thinks that cultural entities are characterized by an ontological peculiarity in the sense that their existence presupposes some material entity to which they are embodied, but despite of this their properties cannot be reduced to the properties of that entity. There is, however, another non-reductive account of higher level properties than the kind of emergence with which Margolis attempts to explain the constitution of Intentional properties. That theory, in fact, is more popular nowadays within such disciplines as philosophy of mind than Margolis’ version of emergence. This is the supervenience thesis. After reductive views of the human mind and of mental properties and concepts were considered unworkable, for example due to such ideas as the multiple realizability principle developed by Hilary Putnam and Donald Davidson’s emphasis on “the anomalousness of the mental,” supervenience arose as a promising framework in which philosophy of mind could proceed.<sup>70</sup> A commitment to supervenience alone does not lead one to hold any specific view of the human mind and the constitution of mental properties, but rather as Jaegwon Kim explains, “a host of classic positions on the mind-body problem” is “consistent” with it.<sup>71</sup> Where the fruitfulness of supervenience was considered to lie was that it provided a kind of layered view of reality

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<sup>69</sup> Margolis (2000, 111-112).

<sup>70</sup> Kim (1998, 3).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. (12).



which managed to sustain the intuitive idea philosophers of mind wanted to keep that physical reality is ontologically primary to the mental. Moreover, while the mental is not reducible to the physical, the mental is nevertheless to a certain degree dependent on the physical.<sup>72</sup> The specific non-reductive character which the supervenience thesis is committed to and the relationship it depicts between different levels of properties become apparent from the way the core idea of the principle has been usually formulated. This states that “mental properties supervene on physical properties in that for every mental property M, if something has M, it has a physical property P such that necessarily if anything has P it has M.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, no mental difference without a physical one.

For philosophy of art the supervenience thesis, in turn, implies that cultural, significant, meaningful, aesthetic, etc. properties are supervenient on physical properties in the sense that their qualities are not independent from the physical properties of the object, but they supervene upon them similar to the way mental properties supervene on physical ones and evaluative on non-evaluative ones. In fact, Kim uses the way in which the aesthetic properties of a statue are constituted by its physical properties as an example of how the idea of supervenience works.<sup>74</sup> The applicability of the supervenience thesis for philosophy of art has been a matter of discussion in analytic aesthetics, and some skepticism regarding its prospects has also appeared.<sup>75</sup> However, to give one example, Frank Sibley’s already classic account of aesthetic concepts involves a view of the relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic concepts that bears a similarity to the supervenience thesis.<sup>76</sup>

Now, given that the supervenience thesis has already been used in explaining the constitution of such properties aesthetics and philosophy of art are interested in, why cannot an ontological theory of culture be developed from it which may be used to challenge the position of Margolis’ cultural realism as the only viable form of cultural realism? Moreover, given the relationship it depicts between aesthetic, intentional, cultural properties and their physical basis, this kind of view of cultural ontology does not have any explicit relativistic consequences. This theory, if successful, could thus be relied on in the attempt to challenge Margolis’ relativism.

There is one significant obstacle to this attempt. This is the skepticism that Margolis has presented towards the possibility of developing a more systematic account of cultural entities on the basis of the supervenience thesis. He is very firm on this claiming, for example, that the “culturally ‘emergent’ world of art and history is not equivalent to any mental world

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. (16-17).

<sup>73</sup> Kim (1996, 223).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Eaton (1994, 1998); Bender (1996); MacKinnon (2001).

<sup>76</sup> Sibley, for example, claims that “aesthetic concepts, all of them, carry with them attachments and in one way or another are tethered or parasitic upon non-aesthetic features” (Sibley 1959, 442). Sibley’s work on aesthetic concepts is still considered highly relevant, and it has served as an important inspiration for some more recent accounts. For example, Jerrold Levinson’s version of aesthetic realism is, in his own words, “rooted” in Sibley’s “seminal essays” (Levinson 2003, 61).

‘supervenient’ on physical nature.”<sup>77</sup> In fact, Margolis not only finds his cultural realism to be significantly at odds with the idea of supervenience, but that commitment to the kind of emergence which forms the core of that account undermines the view of the relationship between the cultural and the physical the supervenience thesis involves, that is, “the bare admission that the Intentional ‘natures’ of texts are alterable under interpretation instantly renders untenable the supervenience thesis. This is a splendid and inexpensive gain.”<sup>78</sup>

The reason for Margolis to hold this skeptical attitude towards the prospects of the supervenience thesis seems to be that despite being non-reductive it nevertheless, in Margolis’ eyes, involves too deterministic a picture of the relationship between the Intentional properties of the cultural entity and the properties of the physical entity in which it is embodied. These properties cannot exhibit the kind of relationship with each other the supervenience thesis presupposes, for “there is no known procedure (rule, criterion, algorithm, law, or the like) by which, from a description of any physical events, we could infer in a reliable way any culturally significant events we spontaneously recognize....”<sup>79</sup> That is to say, cultural properties are emergent precisely in the sense that the physical properties of the entity to which the cultural entity is embodied do not determine what properties the cultural entity may have as directly as supervenience implies.

The supervenience thesis also has a further implication which for Margolis renders it incapable of accounting for cultural realism. This is the primacy which is ascribed to the physical in supervenience in explaining the relationship between the higher and lower level, that is, that there can be a difference on the higher level only if a change occurs on the lower level. Given that Margolis’ emergence allows cultural objects to obtain new properties during their career without any kind of change in their physical constitution, it is not a surprise that Margolis is so skeptical towards the prospects of cultural realism formulated in terms of supervenience, for that idea renders precisely this kind of adding or imputing impossible.

Now, rather than embarking on a systematic project of developing a theory of cultural ontology with which to challenge Margolis’ cultural emergence and the relativistic implications it involves, I shall here confine myself to showing that Margolis does not, ultimately, manage to prove that any kind of view of supervenience could not serve as a foundation for cultural realism. I shall give two reasons for this assessment. First, it seems that the supervenience thesis manages to accommodate certain intuitions about the constitution of aesthetic and artistic properties and the artist’s work we want to keep. Second, it might be the case that Margolis is able to overcome certain criticisms addressed against his cultural emergence only if he rephrases the core of his emergence in a way that the view on the relationship between the physical and the cultural it involves begins to resemble the way that relationship is construed in the supervenience thesis.

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<sup>77</sup> Margolis (1995b, 52).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. (54).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

One observation that I think lends support for the view that the supervenience thesis may not be as incapable of accounting for the constitution of cultural properties as Margolis insists, is the trivial-seeming fact that if an artist wants to modify the aesthetic character of her work, she presumably will have to alter the physical properties her work possesses.<sup>80</sup> This observation is in line with the core of supervenience, that is, that higher-level changes require lower-level changes. The ending of Dimitri Shostakovich's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony serves as a good example with which the relationship of the physical, material, or non-aesthetic properties of the artwork to its aesthetic and cultural properties may be illuminated. The famous conductor Arturo Toscanini considered that work a great triumph, apart from the ending of the symphony, in which Toscanini considered Shostakovich had failed to compose the striking climax he had sought. After hearing Toscanini's evaluation, Shostakovich became furious, because he thought that Toscanini's aesthetic judgment of the piece rested on a misunderstanding of the symphony's true character. That is, Shostakovich tells us, his intention was not to write "any exultant finales, for what exultation could there be?" Rather, Shostakovich continues his description, the rejoicing with which the 5<sup>th</sup> symphony ends:

Is forced, created under a threat, as in *Boris Godunov*. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing' and you rise, shakily, and go marching off muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing'. What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that. Fadeyev heard it, and he wrote in his diary, for his personal use, that the finale of the Fifth is irreparable tragedy. He must have felt it with his Russian alcoholic soul.<sup>81</sup>

Now, the important thing to note is that the aesthetic character of hollowness and forced rejoicing is based on one particular feature. This is the fact that the tempo marking of the ending is considerably slower than it is in the case of other exultant climaxes in the history of music. In other words, this tempo marking precisely turns the aesthetic character of the ending

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<sup>80</sup> Given supervenience's ability to account for this elementary fact of artistic creation it is not a surprise that Nick Zangwill has called the supervenience thesis "an entrenched principle of our ordinary 'folk aesthetics'" (Zangwill 2003, 329). Jerrold Levinson's account of aesthetic properties is also of relevance in this context, for it explores the ways in which the idea of supervenience may be utilized in a defense of aesthetic realism. However, it is unclear how extensive a critique of Margolis' ontological fluxism may be drawn from it, even if considered successful in its present form. The main reason for this is that the critical points which antirealist versions of aesthetic value, such as Alan Goldman's, have raised against Levinson's realist position, and which Levinson has taken pains to meet (Levinson 1994; 2001), are in some respects different from those Margolis would arguably raise. For example, whether aesthetic attributions contain as an essential element an evaluative aspect, a key point of controversy between Levinson and some antirealists, does not seem to have that much bearing on the issue, whether Margolis' fluxism and the view of aesthetic properties it implies should be accepted or not. See especially Margolis' criticism of Eddy Zemach's aesthetic realism in Margolis (2000). Margolis' reasons for finding Zemach's version of realism inadequate are related to the skeptical attitude towards the supervenience thesis his cultural ontology exhibits, that is, Zemach's analysis involves a mistaken conception of the nature of cultural entities. Margolis writes, "In a word, there is, finally, no point in speaking of the objective and actual properties of artworks without explaining the ontic relationship between natural and cultural (culturally emergent, or culturally constituted) entities. I press the point against both Zemach and Danto." (Ibid. 112.)

<sup>81</sup> *Testimony* (140).

upside down, and if that ending is played at a faster tempo than is indicated in the score, as is often done, the ending would not possess those characteristic features Shostakovich intended. Instead, it would provide that ending with musical qualities related to joy, happiness, and optimism, that is, features the composer wanted to avoid.

Now, the reason for this being an illuminative case is that it precisely shows how in some cases the aesthetic and cultural properties are connected with the lower-level properties a work has. That is, the higher-level aesthetic properties of Shostakovich's symphony, such as the feeling of an empty triumph, is based on a lower-level, descriptive property, such as the tempo marking of the ending. Presumably, if Shostakovich had wanted to give the symphony's ending a festive character, for example by being forced to obey the aesthetic principles of the Politburo, he would not have given the piece's ending the tempo marking it presently has. At least in this case, there seems to be the kind of relationship between lower-level and higher-level properties that is compatible with the way the idea of supervenience depicts their relationship.

Another example found in the arts lends support for a similar view of the constitution of higher-level properties of cultural entities. In his novel *Immortality*, Milan Kundera outlines an imaginary example which rises to an almost Putnamesque ingenuity. In the example, Kundera presents a story concerning the development of the pictorial arts with one significant difference to the way it actually developed. The discrepant feature between the two concerns the conventions of Western portraiture. While in actual art history people are usually depicted in portraits with a tranquil and subdued smile on their faces, in the possible art history imagined by Kundera, the smiles the depicted persons carry on their faces are more akin to a grimace, which, by revealing their teeth and gums, gives the portraits in this alternative art history a character that is very far from the tranquility marked by actual portraiture.<sup>82</sup> Now, given this significant difference between the two art histories, it is arguable that, everything else being equal, the paintings belonging to these alternative schemes of portraiture would have different aesthetic properties. For this reason, the case imagined by Kundera in *Immortality* lends support for the view of the constitution of higher-level cultural and aesthetic properties depicted in the supervenience thesis. That is, the portraits in the alternative art histories have different higher-level properties, whatever those might be, because they have different descriptive lower-level properties, that is, differently painted smiles.

The upshot of these two examples is that it does not seem reasonable to deny that there is no connection whatsoever between the Intentional properties of a cultural entity and the properties of the physical entity in which it is embodied. Margolis' emergence, of course, by no means denies this. What these two cases, however, do seem to imply is that perhaps Margolis' negative assesement concerning the prospects of developing an ontological theory

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<sup>82</sup> Kundera (1992).

of culture on the basis of the supervenience thesis is too pessimistic. That is, while it may indeed be the case that “there is no known procedure (rule, criterion, algorithm, law, or the like) by which, from a description of any physical events, we could infer in a reliable way any culturally significant events,” as Margolis claims, the character of the culturally significant properties should nevertheless be seen as more intimately connected to the physical properties the cultural entity has than Margolis’ account of emergence assumes. If that, however, is the case, then Margolis’ negative assessment of the prospects of developing a viable form of cultural realism on the basis of the supervenience thesis indeed seems overhasty.

Another way of drawing support for the view that Margolis’ assumption on the prospects of developing a cultural ontology on the basis of the supervenience thesis is too pessimistic is to show that his own account of emergence manages to overcome some problems only if it resorts to a view of the relationship between the different levels of properties which is similar to the way that relationship is construed in the supervenience thesis. While finding the view that “the mental is embodied in the material” which forms the core of Margolis’ emergentism, “a philosophically interesting” position, Göran Hermerén has some reservations about it, for he senses it contains a threat of ontological dualism, despite Margolis’ clear determination to avoid it. In his opinion, that Margolis’ emergentism is in danger of slipping into some form of dualism is a result of the way the embodiment relation is construed in it. Margolis is a materialist in the sense that the existence of a cultural entity always presupposes some form of physical existence, that is, cultural entities are physically embodied. At the same time, Margolis is driven by anti-reductive goals, which is to say that despite being physically embodied, culturally emergent properties cannot be reduced to the properties of the physical entity in which the cultural entity is embodied. In other words, the way Margolis saves his materialism from becoming a form of reductionism is that the emergence relation “cannot be defined in material terms.”<sup>83</sup> However, according to Hermerén, “the problem is how to avoid ontic dualism, if this move is made.”<sup>84</sup>

As we saw, Margolis draws an analogy between artworks and persons, construing them both as selves. Now, Hermerén argues that precisely the way the relationship between material properties and cultural properties is drawn in Margolis’ emergentism overlooks certain crucial differences in the emergence relations characterizing these two cases. This is the fact that while the body where one’s person is embodied did not exist before that person was born, the block of marble in which *Pietà*, for example, is embodied did exist before Michelangelo set out to carve that piece, *Pietà* thus being more independent from its material basis than a person is from his body. Another factor that Hermerén thinks separates these embodiment relations from each other is that “the physical body is also likely to change within a few decades in a way the marble does not.”<sup>85</sup> Now, the fact that Margolis overlooks

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<sup>83</sup> Hermerén (2005, 559).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

these differences between the embodiment relations Hermerén takes as an indication that in the case of artworks Margolis ends up construing the relationship between its physical properties and its culturally emergent properties in a too independent way. This is the reason why Hermerén believes that Margolis' view may have trouble in avoiding ontic dualism.

However, I do not believe that the threat of ontic dualism is as pressing as Hermerén's criticism assumes. This is because Margolis seems to have the possibility of construing the embodiment relationship holding between the Intentional properties of the cultural entity and the material properties of the entity in which that cultural entity is embodied in a way that a slippage into any form of dualism can be avoided. That this possibility is available for Margolis may be shown from the fact that in his emergentism cultural entities may lose those Intentional properties they have at one point of their history possessed. For example, one case in which this may, in his opinion, occur is when the material properties of a cultural entity deteriorate, Margolis referring to Da Vinci's *Last Supper* as a case in point.<sup>86</sup>

Now, if Margolis is able to account for the possibility that cultural entities can lose their Intentional properties as a result of deterioration in material, it seems that the threat of ontic dualism is not as pressing as Hermerén thinks. That is, Margolis' emergentism can construe the relationship between Intentional properties and the material properties to which the cultural entity is embodied in a way that the two levels do not become as independent from each other as they do in some form of ontological dualism, as for example in the straw Cartesian view according to which our mind is wholly separable from our body.

However, the reason why Margolis' ability to form a tighter relationship between the cultural and the material than ontological dualism allows room for is not an interesting conclusion because it allows his emergentism to overcome the criticism Hermerén addresses to it, but because once this manoeuvre has been made the content of that view no longer seems to be at variance with the supervenience thesis to such high a degree as Margolis has assumed. That is, if the emergence developed by Margolis allows for the possibility that cultural entities may lose their cultural properties as a result of deterioration in their material basis, as is the case with *Last Supper*, does not his emergentism begin to overlap with the supervenience thesis in certain significant respects, that is, that higher level changes are explained in terms of changes at the lower level. At least, the supervenience thesis implies an assessment of the case of *Last Supper* similar to the one Margolis' emergentism eventually provides. Now, if this kind of point of contact may be construed between Margolis' account of emergence and the supervenience thesis, the critical assessment of supervenience Margolis' relativism involves again turns out to be overhasty, for it might be the case that Margolis' position on cultural ontology begins to look more compelling the more it begins to resemble the supervenience thesis.

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<sup>86</sup> Margolis (1999, 91).

## **5. Conclusions**

The title of this chapter asks whether Margolis' defense of relativism falls into an impasse. I think this is indeed the conclusion we have now arrived at. The reading of Margolis' defense of relativism presented in this chapter saw it as consisting of two interrelated strands, which are jointly intended to support the conclusion that a relativistic logic should be favoured in interpretation. After the force of the philosophical assumption Margolis called "archism" was shown to be less binding than has been assumed, Margolis thought that a possibility opened up for favoring a relativistic logic in some sectors of inquiry if that kind of option was considered to be better suited for meeting the challenges a given legitimative question poses. That is, since relativism need not be an incoherent view, we can rely on a relativistic logic whenever we feel the need for it. Margolis drew further support for favoring the kind of relativistic logic outlined by him from an ontological theory of cultural entities which highlighted their indeterminate and alterable nature. Since cultural entities are only histories, their nature does not exhibit the kind of determinacy that a commitment to bivalence, in Margolis' opinion, requires. Hence, a relativistic logic is better suited for accounting for the legitimation of interpretive statements than a bivalent one.

Both of the lines that Margolis' defense of relativism ultimately takes have now been blocked. First, it was argued that the use of relativistic logic in the legitimation of interpretations is a less compelling option than Margolis assumes. That conclusion was seen to have an effect on the second line constituting Margolis' defense of relativism. That is, a rejection of relativistic logic in interpretation was seen to alter the terms with which the prospects of an ontological theory of culture are to be assessed. This in turn was taken to imply that Margolis' emergentism does not occupy the kind of privileged position in regard to this issue Margolis assumes. Margolis in other words ultimately fails in his attempt to show that his emergentism is truly the only framework upon which a viable form of cultural realism may be built.

Mime

I was brewing this broth; drink it now,  
And I will win your trusty sword and  
with it the helmet and treasure.

Siegfried

So you would rob me of my sword  
and what it earned me, the ring and the booty?

Mime

Why must you mistake me?  
Do I stammer and stumble over my words?  
I take the utmost trouble hypocritically to hide  
my inmost thoughts, and you, stupid scamp, misunderstand me.  
Open your ears and listen closely: hear what Mime means!

Richard Wagner *Siegfried* Act Two

## II From Humpty Dumpty to James Joyce: Donald Davidson's Late Philosophy and the Question of Intention

Having now provided the relativist with something to chew over for some time, I shall move on to the question regarding the position of the author's intentions in interpretation. In the first parts of this chapter, I shall offer a reading of some aspects of Donald Davidson's thinking, which will be relevant for the intentionalist theory of interpretation to be developed further in the later parts of this thesis. The examination of Davidson's views I present is based on an assumption that as Davidson's philosophical career proceeded certain of its key conceptions underwent transformations. This chapter tries to track the character of these changes, as well as the effect they had on the whole of Davidson's philosophical work.

Commentators on Davidson's work have already pointed out that some kind of transformation indeed seems to have occurred particularly in the way Davidson approaches language, and some formulations found in Davidson's later texts have raised confused reactions, for they have been seen to be hard to reconcile with his earlier views.<sup>87</sup> It is perhaps in line with this bewilderment that different kinds of assessments have been presented on the relationship between Davidson's earlier and later texts. For example, Björn Ramberg thinks that the skepticism towards the very idea of there being such a thing as a language – an insistence which underlies Davidson's later texts on language as a whole – is merely an extension of the goal apparent in Davidson's earlier texts which refrain from giving a role to such linguistic concepts as meaning and reference in a viable semantic theory.<sup>88</sup> Martin Gustafsson, in turn, claims that Davidson's views underwent a more significant transformation. In his opinion, the very picture of language functioning in the background of

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<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Hacking (1986, 447).

<sup>88</sup> Ramberg (1989, 1).



Davidson's approach changed. That is, while the major goal of Davidson's earlier texts especially from "Truth and Meaning" (1967) onwards was to construct an adequate semantic theory for natural languages, a theory whose structure was provided by Alfred Tarski's formal account of truth, in Gustafsson's opinion, "the post 1984 Davidson" "gives up the notion of natural languages with a specified structure" which is assumed in the attempt to construct a systematic semantic theory for natural languages. Instead, Davidson takes as his starting point the "truly creative and unforeseeable elements" involved in language use, and insists that these kinds of factors should have a more prominent position within philosophy of language than has previously been the case.<sup>89</sup>

Evidence in support for both diagnoses may be found. For example, the more moderate reading offered by Ramberg receives support from the fact that one of the requirements Davidson sets for the adequacy of a semantic theory in his earlier texts is its ability to embrace the fact that while the set of words and the rules on the basis of which they are connected into more complex expressions is finite in character, people are nevertheless able to understand an infinite number of expressions.<sup>90</sup> The kinds of linguistic phenomena invoked by Gustafsson are thus arguably within the scope of a semantic theory that is able to meet this particular requirement introduced by Davidson.

Then again, Gustafsson's reading also seems to capture features that are important for Davidson's thinking. That the kinds of features highlighted by Gustafsson indeed came to occupy a more essential position within Davidson's approach to language becomes apparent from the very first page of Davidson's article "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986), a text that for Gustafsson marks the decisive turning point in Davidson's thinking.<sup>91</sup> There, Davidson insists that philosophers have tended to neglect the kind of creative language use that is typical, for example, of the linguistic behavior of the radio sitcom writer Goodman Ace. Davidson thinks that this way of using language is not all that rare, but, in fact, "ubiquitous." For this reason it should have a proper place in philosophical accounts of language as well, and its possible philosophical imports should be considered.<sup>92</sup>

## ***1. The Principle of Charity and Holism in Davidson's Late Philosophy***

In this chapter the investigation of Davidson's views will build on Gustafsson's understanding of the development of Davidson's philosophical work. I shall explore the consequences that Davidson's "post 1984" thinking has on some of the central notions and conceptions of

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<sup>89</sup> Gustafsson (1998, 439).

<sup>90</sup> Davidson (1984/1967, 17).

<sup>91</sup> However, as Gustafsson also observes, in some earlier texts, Davidson already presented ideas similar to those that are important for "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." See especially Davidson (1984/1982).

<sup>92</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 89).

Davidson's philosophy. The aspect of Davidson's work I will in particular be interested in is the role Davidson ascribes for the so-called principle of charity in interpretation and understanding. As is well known, at a basic level this principle maintains that in interpretation the subject should be assumed to possess a certain degree of basic rationality and to hold mostly true beliefs about the world. The need for these kinds of assumptions follows from the emphasis that is laid on the interrelated nature of belief and meaning in Davidson's approach. This, in turn, is a consequence of the claim that approach involves that the concept of truth would serve the ends of a semantic theory much more profitably than such an obscure intensional notion as meaning.<sup>93</sup>

Davidson's approach to philosophy of language is formed through the perspective of the radical interpreter. That is, Davidson replaces the Socratic question "What is meaning?" with the question, what does the interpreter have to know so that she is able to provide an interpretation of the speaker's utterances? Davidson's starting point owes a lot to the account of radical translation offered by his teacher Willard van Orman Quine, and while Davidson is much more optimistic about the prospects of providing a theory of meaning for a language than Quine was, he, nevertheless, credits precisely Quine for "having saved philosophy of language as a serious subject by showing it could be pursued without what there cannot be: determinate meanings."<sup>94</sup>

For Davidson, what sentences a person holds true is a function of two factors; what the speaker believes and what he takes those sentences to mean. The problem this picture of the relationship between belief and meaning poses for the interpreter is that she cannot infer meaning without knowing what the person whose utterances are under interpretation believes and vice versa.<sup>95</sup> Here is where the principle of charity steps in, for by providing the interpreter with the trust that most of the speaker's beliefs are true, he is able to break into the circle that the speaker's beliefs and the meanings of her utterances form. The principle of charity is, in other words, "intended to solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving meaning."<sup>96</sup>

The idea that interpretation should be constrained by the principle of charity has received a fair amount of criticism ranging from the claim that it involves too idealistic a picture of human rationality,<sup>97</sup> to the observation that in some cases following the principle of charity would, in fact, give the wrong interpretive result, that is, in certain kinds of cases it is in danger of giving an interpretation of the speaker's utterance that we would intuitively regard as incorrect.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, in an age of multiculturalism which highlights the presence of cultural differences and our likely inability to bridge them, the principle of charity must sound

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<sup>93</sup> Davidson (1984/1967, 20-22); Davidson (1984/1973, 126).

<sup>94</sup> Davidson (2001, 145).

<sup>95</sup> Davidson (1984/1973, 134-135).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. (137).

<sup>97</sup> Henderson (1992).

<sup>98</sup> Grandy (1973).

like a remnant of European logocentricism and the male-dominated system which gave rise to it. Colin MacCabe, in fact, explicitly equates the attitude which, in his view, receives an expression in the principle of charity, with old forms of imperialism. The deplorable fact with this principle is that it does not leave room for “a radical confrontation with difference.”<sup>99</sup>

Some of the criticisms aimed at the claim that the principle of charity should occupy as essential a position in interpretation as Davidson insists have, however, been seen to rest on mistaken conceptions about the ultimate nature of that principle. According to Ramberg, their usual failure is that they overlook how fundamental Davidson considers the assumptions contained in the principle of charity to be for interpretation. That is, the requirement expressed in the principle that assumes the speaker is largely correct about the world and holds a largely rational pattern of beliefs and other propositional attitudes should not be construed as a kind of “rule of thumb” that may or may not be followed. This is a conception of the principle that some criticisms are, in Ramberg’s opinion, underlain by.<sup>100</sup> As Davidson observes, charity is not “an option,” but it is “forced on us,”<sup>101</sup> which is to say that given the interrelated nature of the agent’s beliefs and the contents of his utterances, the interpreter has no other option, but to count his subject of interpretation right in most matters if he is to make sense of the utterances of the speaker. In other words, charity is “not a virtue, but simply a condition of understanding others at all.”<sup>102</sup>

Although the core of the principle of charity assumes this kind of outlook on human cognitive faculties, Davidson emphasizes in many places that the centrality of charity for his account of interpretation does not make it incapable of accommodating the phenomenon of irrationality within it. Neither does it rule out the existence of false beliefs, and hence the possibility of disagreement between interpreter and the one whose utterances are under interpretation. After having presented the core of the principle of charity and how that requires the interpreter to attribute a certain degree of basic rationality to the subject, Kathrin Glüer continues by remarking how “the usual disclaimers are in order” precisely at the point to which her exposition of Davidson’s views has just proceeded.<sup>103</sup> As she remarks, “charity does not exclude the possibility of mistaken belief, and it does not recommend making aliens right as often as possible either.”<sup>104</sup>

It is, nevertheless, difficult to assess the ultimate validity of the kinds of criticisms accusing Davidson’s account of charity of ignoring differences between ways of thinking, for Davidson leaves the amount of false beliefs and irrationality that the principle can, ultimately, allow room for unspecified. Still, the fact that Davidson’s account does involve “the usual disclaimers” suggests that the criticisms, such as MacCabe’s, do, after all, involve too strong a

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<sup>99</sup> MacCabe (1986, 7).

<sup>100</sup> Ramberg (1989, 73-75).

<sup>101</sup> Davidson (1984/1974, 197).

<sup>102</sup> Davidson (2005/1998, 319).

<sup>103</sup> Glüer (2006, 341).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. (341-342).

reading of charity. In fact, what Davidson might say to these criticisms is that they overlook what the individuation of differences requires, that is, how the individuation of differences rests on a substantial amount of sameness. Rather than committing oneself to the view that there are no differences between the way people think, the principle should be understood to imply a weaker view according to which we can quarrel with different world views but “without a vast common ground, there is no place for the disputants to have their quarrels.”<sup>105</sup> That is to say, differences in opinion and in beliefs are “intelligible only against a background of massive agreement.”<sup>106</sup> Or as Pierce Rawling encapsulates the implications of the principle of charity, “just as there is no chaos except against a background of order, so there is no irrationality except against a background of rationality.”<sup>107</sup>

The reason why I have decided to approach Davidson’s views on the principle of charity through his later texts is that they, in my view, provide an account of the conditions of understanding which allows the Davidsonian position on interpretation and understanding to overcome precisely those criticisms which accuse the principle of assuming too rosy a picture of human cognitive faculties. This is because in the approach to language offered by the “post 1984 Davidson” the rationality assumptions interpretation and understanding are seen to involve are depicted in a more detailed and context-sensitive fashion than in certain initial formulations of the principle of charity. Simultaneously, Davidson allows much more variance between the assumptions that are at work in different contexts than was previously the case. The kind of skepticism these texts by Davidson as a whole adopt towards conventionalist accounts of meaning suggests that in many cases the success of communication is explained in terms of highly unique and perhaps passing elements. These are, in Davidson’s opinion, not accounted for by those approaches emphasizing the role of shared rule-governed linguistic practices as conditions of understanding. It is precisely these features found in Davidson’s later thought that I think provide a possibility for reconsidering the ultimate role of the principle of charity in the Davidsonian picture, and the kinds of faculties that are called for from the interlocutors so that they can reach understanding.

The reading of Davidson’s views offered below, however, is not only intended to serve exegetical purposes, but it will simultaneously introduce those aspects of Davidson’s thinking which will be relevant for the intentionalist theory of interpretation to be developed in the latter parts of this thesis. In the second half of this chapter, I shall argue that an intentionalist theory established on the kind of Davidsonian foundation provided in the first part is able to formulate a convincing reply to a problem that modest intentionalist views on interpretation currently found in analytic philosophy of art have had trouble overcoming. This conclusion will, however, serve only as one of the reasons why I think a modest intentionalist theory of interpretation should be built on Davidsonian elements. Another reason is provided by the

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<sup>105</sup> Davidson (1984/1977, 200).

<sup>106</sup> Davidson (1984/1973, 137).

<sup>107</sup> Rawling (2003, 93).

holistic outlook on human mentality that Davidson's texts contain. While holistic emphases may already be found in various parts of Davidson's earlier texts, in Davidson's later texts, he develops that view into a more systematic picture of the relationship between mind and world. The latter parts of the first half of this chapter give the outlines of this development.

### *Meaning, Intention, and Conventions*

Davidson's later philosophy of language is connected with the tradition in philosophy of language whose different formulations P.F. Strawson has collected under the heading "communication-intention theories" and for which Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy served as an initial inspiration. As opposed to the formal accounts of language which dominated the earliest days of analytic philosophy, this approach is founded on the assumption that language is primarily a medium for communication, and that theories of meaning should approach it in such terms.<sup>108</sup> This is an assumption Davidson shares as well.<sup>109</sup> However, Davidson's later philosophy of language simultaneously departs from this tradition in certain ways, for example by providing a different view of the role of conventions in communication from the one these approaches in general involve, a view that culminates in Davidson's claim that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed."<sup>110</sup>

By conventionalist theories of meaning Davidson understands views in which the meanings of expressions are considered "systematic and learned in advance" in the sense of being "governed by learned conventions or regularities."<sup>111</sup> One formulation in which Davidson thinks this kind of outlook on language receives an expression is the controversial reading of Wittgenstein's private language argument offered by Saul Kripke.<sup>112</sup> However, the view of meaning emerging from that exposition is in no way unique, for similar emphases are to be found, for example, in John Searle's philosophy of language, which elaborates the speech act approach to language initiated by John L. Austin. Both accounts see language as consisting essentially of a set of rule-guided practices, the rule-guided nature of meaning

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<sup>108</sup> Strawson (1971/1969).

<sup>109</sup> See especially (Davidson 2005/1994, 120).

<sup>110</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 107).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. (93).

<sup>112</sup> Davidson (2001, 111-121). Because of its controversial nature, I shall refer to the views put forward in Kripke's work *Wittgenstein on Private Language and Rule-Following* as Kripkenstein's. For example, while David Stern finds Kripke's work the most discussed work on Wittgenstein in recent years, (Stern 2004, 2) he claims that Kripke nevertheless "misunderstands Wittgenstein's use of the [private language] argument" (ibid. 188). Kripke himself is not unaware of the problematic nature of his reading, for in the introduction to the work he emphasizes that "the present paper should be thought as expounding neither 'Wittgenstein's' argument nor 'Kripke's': rather Wittgenstein's argument as it struck him, as it presented a problem for him" (Kripke 1982, 5). Davidson also acknowledges the difficulty of saying whether the views presented are Wittgenstein's or not. For this reason, while discussing the work, Davidson refers to the ideas as Kripkenstein's, and I shall follow him in this (Davidson 2005/1994, 119).

serving as the condition of communication. The feature which unites Davidson's later texts on philosophy of language is an attempt to call into question precisely the role conventions are assumed to occupy in this picture.

Davidson finds the continuing popularity of conventionalist accounts of language puzzling, for he thinks their core idea is hard to reconcile with our frequent experience where the regularities and conventions of language are broken by novel uses of language and by such linguistic phenomena as malapropisms, but in which language users have no difficulties in understanding what the uttered expressions were intended to mean. Davidson thinks that one does not even have to invent "bizarre anecdotes or wonderlands" to make the point that people "all the time... get away with" linguistic mistakes and other cases where they transgress regularities of language.<sup>113</sup> If these kinds of cases are not only possible, but mark the use of language at large, the ultimate position of conventions in accounts of linguistic interaction must, in Davidson's opinion, be re-assessed. That is, "the theoretical possibility of communication without shared practices remains philosophically important because it shows that such sharing cannot be an essential constituent in meaning and communication."<sup>114</sup> What is, instead, needed is "a deeper notion of what words, when spoken in context, mean."<sup>115</sup>

As an alternative, Davidson develops a theory of meaning where the speaker's intentions replace conventions as the most important constituent of meaning. Davidson claims, for example, that what the speaker's "words mean is (generally) what he intends them to."<sup>116</sup> The disclaimer "generally" is important, for despite Davidson emphasizing the role of the speaker's intentions, he does not hold the view that the speaker is able to mean whatever he wishes with his choice of words or that he could not fail to mean what he intended. This is ultimately because the hearer's readiness to interpret the utterances of the speaker must be taken into account, and if the speaker does not succeed in this in an appropriate way, he will have failed to mean what he intended. When framing the meaning the speaker intends his utterance to possess, that is, the way he intends that utterance to be interpreted by the hearer, the speaker must take the hearer's readiness to interpret the utterance into account in the sense that the speaker must have a reasonable belief that the hearer is ultimately able to interpret the utterance in the way he intends it to be interpreted. In other words, "we always have the interpreter in mind; there is no such thing as how we expect, in the abstract, to be interpreted."<sup>117</sup>

What emerges from this starting point is a picture where language use is seen to involve a particular kind of interaction between linguistic interlocutors which is formed through the expectations they have of each others' linguistic capacities. What this process involves more specifically becomes apparent from Davidson's way of describing linguistic interaction in

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<sup>113</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 99).

<sup>114</sup> Davidson (2005/1994, 119).

<sup>115</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 91).

<sup>116</sup> Davidson (2001, 14).

<sup>117</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 103).

terms of a distinction between a prior theory and a passing theory of language. With the first notion Davidson denotes the ways in which the speaker and hearer are prepared beforehand to interpret and understand the utterances of the other, as well as assumptions of the picture that the interlocutors have about each other's linguistic capacities. The passing theory, in turn, expresses how the speaker intends his utterance to be interpreted, while for the interpreter, it expresses the way she ultimately does interpret the utterance of the speaker. If the two coincide, communication succeeds. The relationship between the prior theory and passing theory can be spelled out as follows. The speaker wants to be understood and proceeds in such a way that the interpreter can accomplish the required interpretation. Again, the speaker is not confined to the theory that he believes the interpreter to have [prior theory] because he may deliberately give clues etc. that help the interpreter to gear his theory of interpretation [passing theory]. The interpreter's prior theory is important for the speaker for it underdetermines how he proceeds, but it does not determine what can be meant, it only determines what clues he must give.<sup>118</sup>

That is, according to the Davidsonian view, every speech situation involves certain initial assumptions regarding how the interlocutors presume the listener is equipped to understand one's utterances. However, Davidson's point against conventionalist accounts is that conventions cannot exhaustively explain what is required for this interaction to succeed. In other words, they cannot explain how the speaker manages to gear her passing theory in the way the speaker intends, and neither can conventions tell what clues the speaker must give so that the hearer is able to gear her passing theory to provide for the intended interpretation. In Davidson's opinion, this process is not characterized by the kind of systematicity and preparation that linguistic interaction is, in his opinion, assumed to involve in conventionalist accounts.<sup>119</sup> Rather, it often requires recourse to such things as "wit, luck, and wisdom."

A more detailed look at Kripkenstein's and Searle's respective theories of meaning provides a clearer picture of how Davidson's view of communication departs from conventionalist accounts. Central for Kripkenstein's attempt to overcome the challenge on the impossibility of arriving at factors that determine what expressions mean posed by the skeptic is an insistence on the need to replace the very picture of language on which the skeptic's challenge rests. Instead of considering language a medium whose individual elements receive their meaning from a relationship of correspondence to something external to them, expressions should be thought to derive their meaning from the various roles they occupy in the language games a particular linguistic community consists of.<sup>120</sup> The conventions that underlie these language games are, in turn, essentially rule-governed in the sense that they give the criteria for the correct application of a particular linguistic item. The meaning of an expression is, in other words, neither based on something internal to the speaker's head nor to

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. (101). My italics.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. (93).

<sup>120</sup> Kripke (1982, 76-77).

the state of affairs that expression corresponds to. It is, instead, based on the rules which govern the use of that expression in the various language games making up the linguistic community the speaker inhabits.

Due to the relationship that is seen to hold between rule-governed conventions and the criteria of understanding in Kripkenstein's view, an understanding cannot be attributed to a person, who "no longer conforms to what the community would do in these circumstances..."<sup>121</sup> That is, if the linguistic behavior of an individual diverges too extensively from the rules that his community's language games set for the use of a particular expression, and hence its meaning, it is impossible to attribute definitive content to the expressions of this kind of individual. The view of language use involved in this picture is thus formed on the assumption that "we expect [other members of the language game] to behave as we do."<sup>122</sup> Given these sorts of emphases, it is understandable why David Stern thinks that the account of communication provided by Kripkenstein places substantive restrictions on how individuals may behave in linguistic contexts.<sup>123</sup>

Although Searle, ultimately, formulates a conventional account of language similar to the one offered by Kripkenstein, he nevertheless arrives at that view through a rather different kind of route. Searle regards the speaker's intention as by no means irrelevant, for he thinks it is one of the crucial factors that separate meaningful expressions from mere noises. Nevertheless, he ultimately draws the connection between intentions and conventions in a way that the latter become the primary elements upon which an explanation of the success of communication is founded. For Searle, conventions are primary to an intention of an individual speaker in the sense that that intention must be formed through the rule-governed elements of language, so to speak. In other words, "the intention will in general be achieved if the hearer understands the sentence, i.e., knows its meaning, i.e., knows the rules governing its elements."<sup>124</sup> Since the success of intentions is explained in terms of their relationship to the rule-governed linguistic practices of a given community, Searle's outlook too implies a view where various sorts of restrictions are imposed on the linguistic behavior of a person.

The way Davidson, ultimately, departs from the view of communication provided by Kripkenstein's and Searle's accounts can be begun to be unpacked through his claim that there, in fact, "is no word or construction that cannot be converted to a new use..."<sup>125</sup> Once the full imports of this claim have been drawn, Davidson's reasons for rejecting conventionalist accounts of communication become apparent.

One reason for Searle to emphasize the role of conventions at the cost of the speaker's intentions is the need to avoid a view of meaning usually referred to as the Humpty Dumpty view of meaning, named after the fictional character in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-*

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid. (95).

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. (93).

<sup>123</sup> Stern (2004, 154).

<sup>124</sup> Searle (1969, 48).

<sup>125</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 100).



*Glass, and What Alice Found There*, where Humpty, after having intended “glory” to mean “a nice knockdown argument,” claims to the baffled Alice that his utterances mean whatever he intends them to mean. This is widely considered an unsatisfactory theory of meaning amongst philosophers, for example, by overlooking the essential intersubjective and public character of linguistic meaning. In fact, by laying such stress on the speaker’s intentions in meaning determination, Searle claims that Paul Grice’s account of meaning highlighting the role of the speaker’s intention is in danger of falling precisely into Humpty Dumpty-ism.<sup>126</sup>

However, Davidson does not believe that the only way to avoid Humpty Dumpty-ism is to give conventions of language the kind of role they occupy in Searle’s account of meaning. Davidson accommodates the morals philosophers have drawn from the case of Humpty Dumpty by emphasizing the fact that the speaker must take the hearer’s readiness to interpret his utterances into account when framing the meaning he intends his utterance to possess. This feature in Davidson’s attempt to overcome the problem of Humpty Dumpty indicates that different demands are placed on the speaker in Davidson’s account than in Searle’s. That is, even though the speaker does not have to follow pre-established conventions or rely on something both he and his interlocutor have prepared for in advance in order to be understood, the speaker, nevertheless, has to make himself interpretable. The intention, in other words, has to be reasonable in light of the audience’s capacity to understand. This is a condition of communication Davidson calls “the requirement of interpretability.” It is precisely this requirement that for Davidson provides “the irreducible social factor” involved in language use, for it draws attention to the fact that “someone can’t mean something by his words that can’t be deciphered by another.”<sup>127</sup> This is not because the speaker went beyond the rules of the language game or because he did not formulate his intended meanings in terms of the elements governing the use of the expression in the language game, but because he did not manage to make himself interpretable to the receiver in the sense of providing clues for him that would have enabled the receiver to gear his passing theory in the way the speaker intended. The reason for the failure of Humpty’s intended meaning was not *merely* the fact that he went beyond the rules governing the elements of his community’s language games, but Humpty’s utterance did not ultimately mean what he intended, because he failed to make himself interpretable to Alice. That is, given what Humpty knew about the linguistic capacities of Alice, as well as the way their linguistic interaction had proceeded to the point where Humpty made his utterance, the attempt to give the meaning Humpty intended “glory” to have, i.e., “a nice knockdown argument,” could not be considered a reasonable one. Since the requirement of interpretability states that “you can change the meaning provided you believe... that the interpreter has adequate clues for the new interpretation,”<sup>128</sup> Humpty’s

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<sup>126</sup> Searle (1969, 43-45).

<sup>127</sup> Davidson (2001, 28; 116-117).

<sup>128</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 98).

utterance can be considered a failure even on his own terms, for he himself admits that Alice was not in a position to grasp the meaning he intended his utterance to possess.

Now, given that Davidson's answer to the problem of Humpty Dumpty relies on the reasonableness of the intended meaning, he must provide some sort of account of what that assessment is ultimately based on. In other words, what are the criteria the speaker must fulfill so that he can be said to have conformed to the requirement of interpretability? How does one make oneself interpretable in the appropriate way? To these questions Davidson seems to have only one answer: it is impossible to construe a definitive yardstick for measuring what the reasonableness ultimately amounts to across cases. This negative estimation follows directly from the skepticism Davidson's approach takes towards the role of conventions. Since the success of communication cannot be explained in the terms provided by the conventionalists, neither can the principles offered by them referring to the rule-governed conventions of language be relied on in the attempt to explicate what conforming to the requirement of interpretability ultimately amounts to. That is, if conventions pose no ultimate restrictions on what can be meant, neither are they able to serve as foundations for assessing whether the requirement of interpretability has been met in a specific case.

Despite there being no definitive list of criteria that could be applied across cases Davidson, nevertheless, does introduce certain norms that the satisfaction of the requirement of interpretability, in his opinion, requires. Davidson writes:

What should we say of the many cases in which a speaker expects, or hopes, to be understood in a certain way but isn't? I can't see that it matters.... If a speaker reasonably believes he will be interpreted in a certain way, and speaks with the intention of being so understood, we may choose to say he means what... he would have meant if he had been understood as he expected and intended. Reasonable belief is itself such a flexible concept that we may want to add that there must be people who would understand the speaker as he intends, and the speaker reasonably believes he is speaking to such a person.<sup>129</sup>

Although Davidson's work contains rather detailed examinations of what conditions must be satisfied for communication to succeed, he admits his incapacity to provide a final answer to the question of how people, ultimately, succeed in communicating with one another, that is, how a hearer manages to gear his passing theory to coincide with the one the speaker intends him to use. Davidson, in fact, observes that there is something "mysterious" in the whole process.<sup>130</sup> The core of Davidson's views, nevertheless, remains the same despite admitting his failing in the face of this question: rule-governed linguistic conventions do not play an indispensable role in the process where two people come to understand each other. The understanding does not require that the speaker follows the established conventions of his language, and neither does communication require that the hearer is able to detect the

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<sup>129</sup> Davidson (2005/1994, 123).

<sup>130</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 106).

conventions underlying the speaker's utterances, but rather, in many cases, the hearer manages to derive the passing theory his interlocutor intends her to use:

by wit, luck, and wisdom from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely. There is no more chance of regularizing or teaching the process of creating new theories to cope with new data in any field – for that is what this process involves.<sup>131</sup>

For these reasons, “the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by an appeal to conventions” should be abandoned.<sup>132</sup>

### *From Charity to Imagination: Rationality Assumptions in Davidson's Late Philosophy of Language*

As we saw, Davidson acknowledges that a commitment to the principle of charity does not rule out the existence of false beliefs or the presence of irrationality. Rather, the principle highlights the fact that irrationality and attributions of false beliefs depend on a background of general rationality and a largely true set of beliefs about the world. These disclaimers show that Davidson has always accepted the possibility that interpretation need not proceed under the kinds of assumptions regarding human cognitive capacities receiving an expression in the core of the principle of charity. However, while references to the principle of charity still appear in Davidson's later texts,<sup>133</sup> it seems that especially in those writings where Davidson formulates his anti-conventionalist account of meaning presented in the previous section, the assumptions he considers understanding and interpretation to involve depart in some significant ways from how they are construed in the principle of charity. This is because the description of communication as a dialectics between the passing and the prior theory of language presented in them provides a more context-sensitive and nuanced account of the assumptions involved in interpretation and understanding than is the case with the principle of charity.

Another interesting change that may be detected in Davidson's thinking concerns the scope of the rationality assumptions. In the earlier texts, where the principle of charity occupies an essential position, the emphasis is on the radical interpreter and on the kinds of assumptions the principle allows him to make about the cognitive faculties of the person whose utterances are under interpretation. In the later texts considerations of rationality start to concern the speaker as well. This sort of extension of focus becomes apparent from

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. (107).

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> See, for example, Davidson (2001, 211).

Davidson's claim that the speaker must conform to the requirement of interpretability, that is, the speaker must have a reasonable belief that his interlocutor is able to capture the meaning he intends his expressions to possess by his choice of words, and other contextual clues provided by the speaker in the course of making an utterance. The success of the speaker's intention, in other words, becomes a question of weighing whether the speaker has proceeded in a way that the hearer can be rationally expected to grasp what he intended, that is, whether the framing of the intended meaning is within the limits of rationality. Humpty failed to mean what he intended precisely because his intended meaning went beyond the limits of what it was rational to expect from Alice.

It seems that Davidson's later texts provide an account of understanding and communication, where they are seen to involve a particular kind of shared awareness between the speaker and hearer. On the one hand, this common space allows the speaker to reasonably presume that if he proceeds in a specific way at a particular point of the interaction, he will be understood by his audience in the way he intends to be understood, for he *knows* that taking those courses of actions enables his interlocutor to gear her passing theory so that she is able to arrive at the interpretation intended by him.<sup>134</sup> On the other, the hearer's capacity to gear her passing theory in the way the speaker intends through the clues provided by the speaker is based on the fact that the hearer *knows* that the speaker *knows* that by proceeding in this way the hearer will be able to grasp the intended meaning. It is, therefore, not only important for the success of communication that the speaker and hearer share certain background assumptions with each other, but this must be supplemented by a kind of reflexivity between them, that is, the speaker must know that the hearer has this background, and the hearer must know that the speaker has that background, and the hearer must, furthermore, know that the speaker knows the hearer has this background, and the speaker must know that the hearer knows that the speaker knows that the hearer has this background.<sup>135</sup>

Given that Davidson acknowledges the need to accommodate the existence of false beliefs and irrationality to an outlook otherwise infused by the assumptions involved in the principle of charity, it is arguable that Davidson never thought that that principle expresses everything there is to say about understanding and interpretation. In other words, Davidson's earlier texts admit that there is a kind of gray area, where the principle of charity is no longer able to serve as the condition of understanding. Nevertheless, it is hard to say whether the later texts are intended to draw attention to the logic of communication involved in an area where Davidson did not dare go before, for despite their providing a different view on the conditions of understanding than the principle of charity, these two parts of Davidson's work do not seem to diverge from each other over the point at issue here. That is, the latter texts as a whole are not devoted to an investigation of how communication succeeds under the assumption that the

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<sup>134</sup> Davidson (2005/1994, 123).

<sup>135</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 100). The reflexivity at play here bears some significant similarities with Paul Grice's account of the conversational implicature. See, for example, Grice (2001/1975).

speaker holds a large set of false beliefs about the world and that the web of his beliefs and desires do not make up a consistent whole. The factor that rather serves to separate Davidson's later texts from his earlier ones is that in the latter case the conditions of communication are approached through a more flexible and context-sensitive conception of rationality, which acknowledges that "the kinds and degrees of deviation from the norms of rationality that we can understand or explain are not settled in advance"<sup>136</sup> and that "reasonable belief" is a "flexible concept."<sup>137</sup> It is my belief that it is precisely the emphases in Davidson's later texts outlined above that gives a possibility for the Davidsonian position to formulate a convincing reply precisely to those criticisms which claim that the principle of charity assumes an over-idealistic picture of human cognitive capacities.

Before coming to this issue in more detail, however, let me point out another interesting transformation in Davidson's views that the later texts bring to light, and which is a direct result from the looser and more context-sensitive conception of rationality they involve. In Björn Ramberg's view, Davidson's earlier texts provide a dynamic picture of language, even though this implication has rarely been drawn attention to in the commentary literature on Davidson.<sup>138</sup> The later texts, however, seem to emphasize this aspect of language even more strongly. This is due to Davidson's anti-conventionalist leanings, for that implies that the capacities which communication and understanding are seen to require become more multifarious in character compared to those that were called for from the radical interpreter. That is, it no longer involves just a capacity to perceive what sentences the speaker holds true, but the faculties on which understanding rests on may diverge significantly from each other from case to case. One capacity which seems to receive a growing importance in Davidson's account of communication is imagination. As unlikely as this might sound, Davidson, in fact, himself states that once we have accepted his anti-conventionalist tenets which reject the idea that understanding a language consists of following the rule-governed practices of the language games of one's community, but which is instead marked by a continuous revisal of interpretive suppositions, a faculty the exercise of which successful linguistic interaction may, in Davidson's opinion, in many cases require is "imagination."<sup>139</sup> Jeff Malpas also draws this kind of implication from Davidson's anti-conventionalist emphases.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Davidson (2004/1985, 196). In some texts from the 1980s, Davidson provides meticulous analyses on how it is possible to accommodate the presence of irrationality within a framework that, otherwise, emphasizes rationality as the mark of the mental and in which irrationality is considered to breed unintelligibility. While giving more attention to cases of irrationality, such as weakness of the will and self-deception, than in some of his earlier texts on radical interpretation, Davidson is, nevertheless, still firm on the issue that "rationality... is a condition of having thoughts at all" (ibid.) and that attributions of irrationality are dependent on a background of general rationality. That is, for Davidson, "the irrational is not merely the non-rational, which lies outside the ambit of the rational; irrationality is a failure within the house of reason" (Davidson 2004/1982, 169).

<sup>137</sup> Davidson (2005/1994, 123).

<sup>138</sup> Ramberg (1989, 102).

<sup>139</sup> Davidson (2005/1994, 110).

<sup>140</sup> Malpas (2005, section "Language and Convention").

Imagination is, of course, a highly-loaded word in philosophy, and different kinds of capacities have been referred to with that notion in the course of its history. What seems to be understood with that notion in this context, however, is a capacity to build a diversified picture of human capacities and of the constituents human situations may involve, as well as how these general facts intertwine with the elements making up the individual situation the speaker and hearer inhabit at a particular time. The importance of imagination for the kind of outlook on communication developed by Davidson in his later texts does not follow merely from the emphasis apparent in them that in various cases the success of communication may rest on highly unique and passing elements, but the particular reflexive character communication is seen to involve in it has a similar implication. That is, in order to be understood the speaker must first of all form a picture of his receiver's linguistic capacities, this background underdetermining how he proceeds in communication. Secondly, the speaker's progression must be accompanied by an understanding of why it is precisely this way of proceeding that makes the receiver capable of gearing her passing theory in the intended way, that is, why by proceeding in this way the speaker is able to make herself interpretable for the receiver. Both of these procedures require that the speaker possesses a complex "awareness of human interests and attitudes," as well as an ability to see how those come into play in individual cases.<sup>141</sup> That is, the speaker must grasp how the material he shares with his interlocutor is to be utilized so that the hearer is able to understand him.

While it might seem that these kinds of imagination-related capacities are required primarily from the speaker, this, however, is not the case, for the success of communication requires that the hearer utilizes similar faculties. That is, understanding requires that the hearer can detect those factors the speaker is relying on in his attempt to communicate, and that she is able to grasp why with certain linguistic and other possible additional behavior the speaker intends the hearer to gear her passing theory in a certain way. As was the case with the speaker, what is required from the hearer here is a capacity to apprehend the constituents human situations involve, as well as an awareness of their position in the case at hand. Communication, in other words, requires that the speaker and hearer possess a mutual conception of how the different parts that complex awareness consists of may be put to use in their context of communication so that understanding is achieved.

The loosening of the assumptions regarding rationality apparent in Davidson's later texts goes hand in hand with the growth in importance that imagination acquires in the approach. That is, while it may still be the case that speakers and hearers sharing a largely similar set of true beliefs with each other serves as a kind of initial condition that is required for communication to succeed, in the later texts, understanding and interpretation involves much more finely-grained capacities than just the capacity to tell what sentences one's interlocutor holds true.

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<sup>141</sup> Davidson (2005/1994, 110).

Now, this exposition reveals that Davidson's later texts provide an account of the conditions of understanding and interpretation with somewhat different points of emphasis from those his earlier ones involve. Moreover, by highlighting the fact that Davidson's views truly underwent this kind of transformation, the Davidsonian position on interpretation and understanding is also able to formulate convincing replies especially to those criticisms which accuse it of assuming a too idealistic view of human cognitive capacities, and to modify its ultimate content along the lines that some commentators have suggested. For example, David K. Henderson has some reservations about giving the principle of charity the kind of role in interpretation and understanding that Davidson gives it. This is not only because the assumptions of rationality it involves are, in Henderson's view, hard to reconcile with our own frequent experiences of behaviour which deviate from the norms of rationality, but because empirical research on human psychology also shows that in certain kinds of cases humans act in highly irrational ways.<sup>142</sup> Maria Baghramian raises similar cautions about the principle of charity.<sup>143</sup> In her opinion, these are especially damaging for Davidson's outlook, for observations similar to those coming to light in Henderson's criticism imply that "the link between rationality and successful interpretation" she considers fundamental for Davidson's account is in danger of breaking down.<sup>144</sup>

Henderson's solution to the problem of how to reconcile these observations with the role the principle of charity is intended to play in the radical interpreter's attempt to translate the utterances of his interlocutor, is to cut the interpretation process into half, the decisive differentiating feature between the two phases precisely concerning how strong senses of charity are required in them. In the first phase, Henderson thinks interpretation must proceed under the kind of strong reading of charity Davidson suggests, this strong reading concerning for example such entities as "observation sentences, truth-functions, low-level empirical generalizations concerning technological matters, and occasion sentences."<sup>145</sup> The phase of interpretation involving the strong sense of charity forms a kind of preparatory stage for later interpretive refinements. To posit this kind of preparatory role for the principle of charity is in line with Davidson's emphasis on the fact that the presence of irrationality and identification of false beliefs is possible only against the background of general rationality and a largely true set of beliefs.

Interpretation cannot, however, proceed entirely under the assumptions inherent in the principle of charity precisely because that would require attributing a degree of rationality to the subjects of interpretation which cannot stand the test of our experience and that of empirical psychology. In the later stages of interpretation building on the ground prepared by the principle of charity, a principle Henderson calls "the principle of explicability" takes the

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<sup>142</sup> Henderson (1987, 227-228).

<sup>143</sup> Baghramian (2004, 263).

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. (266).

<sup>145</sup> Henderson (1987, 231).

position of the principle of charity as the basic requirement of interpretation. At this point of interpretation, “construing the source-language users as correct or consistent is beside the point,” but instead the goal is to immerse their behavior into an explanatory framework that makes the instances of behaviour under interpretation “explicable.” Explication and interpretation can be achieved without assuming the full rationality of the agent in cases where it is possible to supplement the explication with an explanation of the irrationality the interpretive scheme used attributes to the agent. This feature of the principle of explicability brings out a crucial difference between interpretation guided by this principle and by the principle of charity in turn. For when Davidson in some places claims that if the interpretive scheme proceeding under the assumptions of charity attributes an outlandish belief or an irrationality to an agent it is more likely that there is something wrong with the interpretation than with the agent. In Henderson’s opinion, in the case of the principle of explicability, “when such an attribution of inconsistency can be incorporated within an explanatory account, the inconsistency of the attributed beliefs does not count as evidence against the translation manual by which they are identified.”<sup>146</sup>

One field which becomes important for interpretation in the refinements Henderson suggests for the Davidsonian position is empirical and social research on human behavior. These areas of research become important for they provide predictions on how people behave in given situations, and what sorts of deviances from certain standards of rationality are to be expected in given cases. In other words, research results presented in them serve as tools for interpretation, for they provide an explanation for irrational behavior.<sup>147</sup> Hence, interpretation need not assume such a link between attributions of rationality and the success of interpretation, and attributions of inconsistent beliefs and irrationality need not speak against the interpretation scheme. For “if the empirical knowledge on which the weighing of attributions of error is based is sufficient to support explanations, then the errors attributed to the speakers of the source-language will often be explicable in terms of that knowledge.”<sup>148</sup>

Now, leaving aside the question whether those fields of empirical research introduced by Henderson should truly have as fundamental a position in understanding and interpretation as he suggests, the factor I want to draw attention to here is that the picture of the rationality assumptions involved in interpretation and understanding provided by Davidson’s later texts shows that it is possible for the Davidsonian position to accommodate Henderson’s critical remarks, as well as the refinements he suggests to it. That is, the principle of charity has only a preparatory role in interpretation and understanding, and at a certain point a principle with a more detailed content takes its position. This is because if the prior theories of linguistic interlocutors, which form the initial horizon for the communication situation, may be based

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid. (234).

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. (237).



on such individual things as “knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex,”<sup>149</sup> it is arguable that the prior theory can also include such elements invoked by Henderson. That is, if according to the account of communication provided by Davidson’s later texts it is seen to require a complex, reflexive awareness of human attitudes, surely that kind of awareness through which one forms interpretive suppositions for different kinds of speakers can be supplemented by empirical research on human psychology.

Henderson does not, in fact, regard his critical account of the principle of charity so much as an insistence on the need to relinquish charity in interpretation altogether as an attempt to refine “the present formulations of the principle.”<sup>150</sup> I think it is possible to read Davidson’s later texts as having precisely this same goal. The refinements that Davidson’s anti-conventionalist account of communication provides for the Davidsonian position on interpretation and understanding as a whole allows that view to accommodate some other critical points as well. After presenting her criticism of Davidson’s account of the principle of charity as a fundamental condition of understanding in which she raises critical points similar to those Henderson presents, Baghramian concludes that “we do not... require either a stable a priori bridgehead or blanket charity in order to understand each other.”<sup>151</sup> Instead, in her opinion, we should see how “numerous” and “varied” those “entry points” are that allows us to enter into the system of thought of another person.<sup>152</sup> I think this is an insistence which Davidson’s views on communication and understanding ultimately come to share as well.

### *Holism of Mind and World and the Problem of Skepticism*

Another transformation that may be detected in Davidson’s views concerns the scope of the holistic emphases found in various parts of Davidson’s earlier texts. The term “holism” has no fixed point of reference in philosophy, and there is no philosophical context in which it would be primarily used, but different kinds of views presented not only in different sections of philosophy, but in completely different philosophical traditions as well, have been collected under that term.<sup>153</sup> What Davidson means by calling his philosophy a form of holism is that it is committed to a view according to which “various aspects of the mental depend on each other.”<sup>154</sup> While Davidson’s earlier texts may already be seen as embodying this kind of outlook on the mental, in his later texts, Davidson began to develop that view into a more systematic and wide-ranging philosophical view, as well as to consider its implications for

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<sup>149</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 100).

<sup>150</sup> Henderson (1987, 227).

<sup>151</sup> Baghramian (2004, 268)

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. (267).

<sup>153</sup> See, for example, Henderson (1993, 14-26).

<sup>154</sup> Davidson (2001, 126).

some of the most fundamental questions of philosophy. As Marc Joseph puts it, Davidson's views eventually formed "a unified theory of mind, language, and action."<sup>155</sup>

In Davidson's opinion, the holistic view of the mind emerging from his work involves an account of the relationship between mind and world that departs in some significant aspects from the way that relationship has been construed by a large body of influential philosophers. The view which Davidson contrasts his account to is not so much a view that would have been developed independently by a particular philosopher as a view which became dominant because of certain other kinds of assumptions the work of a group of philosophers involved. This view, which, in Davidson's view, has become "so ingrained in our philosophical tradition that it is almost impossible to escape its influence,"<sup>156</sup> has received various formulations in the history of philosophy, but a metaphor, which is quite often used to capture its core, derives from David Hume. Hume describes the human mind as "a theatre that watches the passing show," where the show may be regarded as consisting of such elements as "'appearances', sense data, qualia, what is 'given in experience'."<sup>157</sup> The problem which the philosopher faces is to provide an explanation of how it is possible to prove that the elements of the show truly correspond to the way things are in the outer world.

Davidson does not think that the view of the mind he is offering in place of the kind of account expressed in Hume's views is in any way unique, but it can be seen as a part of a larger philosophical development in which we are witnessing "the emergence of a revised view of the relation of mind and world."<sup>158</sup> One account, with which Davidson's analysis bears a particularly close relationship to, is the controversial criticism of modern philosophy offered by Richard Rorty. For Rorty, holism represents "a distrust of the whole epistemological enterprise,"<sup>159</sup> in other words, the enterprise which understood philosophy as a discipline whose quest it was to uncover the conditions under which the passing show the mind is watching matches up with the show as it is really acted out in external reality. Though Davidson's account lacks the historical depth that Rorty's criticism involves, he shares Rorty's understanding of how holism departs from the tradition of epistemology-centered philosophy. For both, holism is not an outlook whose primary intention is to formulate a successful reply to the challenge posed by the skeptic regarding the foundations of our knowledge. That is, how do we know that our subjective impressions truly correspond to the way the world is, which has, in both Rorty's and Davidson's opinion, provided the fuel for the whole epistemological enterprise.<sup>160</sup> Rather, holism tries to provide a view on things that allows us to see how "answering the global skeptic will no longer be a challenge."<sup>161</sup> Or, as

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<sup>155</sup> Joseph (2004, 102).

<sup>156</sup> Davidson (2001, 34).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. (43).

<sup>159</sup> Rorty (1979, 181).

<sup>160</sup> Davidson (2001, xiv).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. (47).

Rorty summarizes the implications of Davidson's critical reading of modern epistemology; we can just tell the skeptic to get lost.<sup>162</sup>

Central for Davidson's attempt to overcome the philosophical framework, which is dominated by the quest for formulating a successful answer to the skeptic, is to replace the conception of the mind on which the epistemological enterprise as a whole rests. On that account there are special sorts of objects which the mind has a special relationship to and whose contents it can know immediately. The skeptic can be seen as sharing this kind of understanding of the mind with the epistemologist, for the challenge posed by him precisely concerns the impossibility of ascertaining that the sensations, whose contents our mind's eye can grasp immediately, truly correspond to the way the world is. The way the holistic account of the mind formulated by Davidson departs from the picture assumed in the epistemological enterprise is precisely that it gets rid of the idea that there are special objects before the mind that the mind can "'entertain', 'grasp'... 'or be 'acquainted with'."'<sup>163</sup> Davidson sees this not so much as providing a solution to the problem of building an indubitable ground for knowledge as a way of eliminating the question altogether. That is, to "dispense" with such entities is to dispense with the epistemological enterprise altogether, "for we cannot ask how such entities can represent the world if there are no such objects..."<sup>164</sup>

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty argues that the empiricist view of justification is plagued by a confusion between causal explanation and justification, that is, the causal role the sensation plays in the belief and what provides justification for our believing in that belief. The empiricist presumes the two questions to be identical with each other, whereas, in Rorty's opinion, they are not. That is, it is a different thing to say that a particular sensation has a causal role in the process as a result of which we come to hold a particular belief than to say that that sensation serves as a bedrock foundation for the belief we come to hold.<sup>165</sup> Davidson formulates the confusion he thinks the empiricist outlook on justification is plagued by in terms of a distinction between "causal intermediaries" and "epistemic intermediaries."<sup>166</sup> With the help of this distinction Davidson tries to locate the ultimate role that sensations play in our coming to have beliefs about the external world. Davidson does not think that "experience and perception play no role in our beliefs about the world," but that their effect is purely causal in character.<sup>167</sup> That is, a certain noise does indeed give rise to a sensation by acting on our cochlea, but that sensation alone does not serve as an explanation of why we come to hold the belief we eventually come to hold, for that depends on other beliefs we hold at that time. Sensations cannot serve as epistemic intermediaries between the world and our beliefs, for that would require that the *reason* for

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<sup>162</sup> Rorty (1991, 138).

<sup>163</sup> Davidson (2001, 34-35).

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. (52).

<sup>165</sup> Rorty (1979, 139-148).

<sup>166</sup> Davidson (2001, 144).

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. (xvi)

our beliefs would be provided by the content of the sensation alone. This, however, is not so, for those reasons are provided by a host of other beliefs we hold.<sup>168</sup> The mistake of the empiricist is, in other words, the following, “sensations cause some beliefs and in *this* sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified.”<sup>169</sup>

The reason why the view on the relationship between mind and world Davidson offers in place of the outlook following from the empiricist view of justification may be called “holistic” is that in it beliefs and propositional attitudes are understood to “come only as a matched set,”<sup>170</sup> which is to say that “we identify thoughts, distinguish among them, describe them for what they are, only as they can be located within a dense network of related beliefs.”<sup>171</sup> This kind of holism provides an alternate picture of belief constitution to the one assumed in the empiricist outlook. It is precisely this difference between the two views that explains why the holist can tell the skeptic to get lost. Since the contents of our beliefs are not determined by how our mind represents reality, the skeptic’s question, how do we know that our mind represents reality accurately is no longer a question that makes sense, or as Davidson at one point puts it, the idea of “a confrontation” between our beliefs and reality is “absurd.”<sup>172</sup>

To extend his attempt to overcome the skeptic’s challenge Davidson turns to the conditions of interpretation, as they are expressed in the principle of charity. In his opinion, this approach to the question of the foundations of our knowledge shows that the mistake in the epistemological enterprise has been the assumption “that the truth concerning what a person believes about the world is logically independent of the truth of those beliefs.”<sup>173</sup> It is precisely this disconnection that has left the door open for the skeptic to formulate his challenge according to which we could hold most of those beliefs we currently do hold, but still the external world could be very different in character from what our beliefs express. This is a gap that, in Davidson’s opinion, can be closed by reflecting on the nature of interpretation, for together with the holistic account of the mind the conditions that process is seen to involve by Davidson implies that most of our beliefs must be true. Since “holism maintains that the contents of speech and thought depend on the relations among meanings and among thoughts,” the identification of a single belief requires that it is inserted in the logical network of other thoughts.<sup>174</sup> This emphasis involved in holism, in turn, implies that “what is not largely consistent with many other beliefs cannot be identified as a belief.”<sup>175</sup> If a place for a given belief cannot, in other words, be found in the network a person’s

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid. (46).

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. (143). Italics Davidson.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. (96).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. (98).

<sup>172</sup> Ibid. (137).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. (206).

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. (65).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. (155).

propositional attitudes form, the belief in question cannot be attributed to him. Since the identification of a single belief requires introducing a pattern of other propositional attitudes in which a place can be located for that belief, and since under the assumptions provided by charity it is impossible to make sense of that pattern if it would not consist mostly of true beliefs, the interpreter's ability to make sense of a person's behavior and utterances is an indication that most of his beliefs must be true. This is basically what Davidson means with his controversial claim that "coherence yields correspondence."<sup>176</sup> In other words, it is impossible to make sense of a person's utterances and behavior if most of his beliefs are false. This conclusion leads Davidson to observe that while "the foundations of interpretation are not the foundations of knowledge... an appreciation of the nature of interpretation can lead to an appreciation of the essentially veridical nature of belief."<sup>177</sup>

## ***2. Overcoming the Intentionalist Debate in Analytic Philosophy of Art***

It might come as a surprise to someone with only a little knowledge of Donald Davidson's philosophy that he has, in fact, claimed literary language to serve as "a prime test of the adequacy of any view on the nature of language."<sup>178</sup> As strange as this might sound given that analytic philosophers of language have rarely considered the problems of literary language, the claim, actually, can be seen to capture the character of the transformation that Davidson's approach to language was argued to have undergone in his later texts in the first parts of this chapter. The texts in which Davidson explicitly considers the problem of literary language and the interpretation of literature embody a view which ascribes an important role for the author's intentions in interpretation. In this respect, Davidson supports a view of interpretation that in many ways involves emphases similar to those that are important for modest intentionalist accounts of interpretation which have recently received growing support in analytic philosophy of art.

Although anti-intentionalist theories of interpretation still have their supporters within this tradition,<sup>179</sup> in recent years, some form of intentionalism has emerged as the most supported view of interpretation. The current discussion is carried out between two different forms of intentionalism in particular; modest actual intentionalism (MI) and hypothetical intentionalism (HI). The significant difference between these two views is that while modest intentionalists argue that as long as certain conditions are met the meaning of the work should be identified with what the author actually intended it to be,<sup>180</sup> hypothetical intentionalism

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid, (137).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. (175).

<sup>178</sup> Davidson (2005/1993, 167).

<sup>179</sup> Dickie and Wilson (1995).

<sup>180</sup> See, for example, Livingston (1996, 627).

sees this variant of meaning to be composed differently, identifying it with the best hypothesis concerning the author's intention made by an appropriately equipped audience.<sup>181</sup>

The remaining parts of this chapter are devoted to an examination of this debate. I shall especially concentrate on examining whether Davidson's ideas on meaning, intention, and interpretation presented in the first parts of this chapter have something to contribute to the debate currently carried out. I shall not provide a detailed examination of what every philosopher who has participated in the discussion has said, but I shall unravel the discussion through a particular problem that has occupied an important position in the debate as a whole. This is again the problem of Humpty Dumpty.

### *The Role of Humpty Dumpty in Analytic Philosophy of Art*

The view of meaning associated with Humpty Dumpty's name has already been touched upon earlier in this chapter. As became apparent, there is virtually no philosopher who agrees with Humpty's claim regarding his ability to mean whatever he wishes, but rather, as Michael Hancher points out, philosophers have tended to side with Alice, while Humpty has been considered "a monster of private language." Humpty is, in other words, a desperate figure, who in "the age of Saussure and Wittgenstein" has been left alone without any "real allies," and rightly so.<sup>182</sup> However, the problem of Humpty Dumpty seems to appear in philosophy of art even more often than in philosophy of language. Monroe Beardsley, for example, considered the view of meaning expressed in Humpty Dumpty's declaration to Alice, and a will to avoid slipping into that kind of view was one of the main reasons for him to end up supporting an anti-intentionalist account of interpretation, that is, the thesis that intentions are irrelevant for the meaning of the work.<sup>183</sup>

However, the case of Humpty structures the current debate between HI and MI even more strongly. In this context, it takes the form of the distinction between utterer's meaning, i.e., what the author intended, and utterance meaning, i.e., what the work's meaning, ultimately, is. Humpty Dumpty-ism has been seen as the view that regards the two as identical with each other. Recently, William Irwin has supported this type of theory, explicitly stating that if Humpty in actual fact had the intention to mean "there's a nice knockdown argument for you" with "there's glory for you," his utterance truly meant that, despite the fact that Alice did not have the faintest idea what her interlocutor had meant with his utterance.<sup>184</sup> However, like

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<sup>181</sup> Jerrold Levinson is the foremost defender of the hypothetical intentionalist position on interpretation. He develops his account, for example, in Levinson (1996, 175-179). See also Levinson (1999) and (2002). For another detailed criticism of actual intentionalism from a hypothetical intentionalist point of view see Trivedi (2001).

<sup>182</sup> Hancher (1981, 49-50).

<sup>183</sup> Beardsley (1981, 49).

<sup>184</sup> Irwin (1999, 56-57).

Humpty, Irwin has also been left alone without any real allies, for both the supporters of HI and MI acknowledge that Humpty Dumpty-ism is a view which should be avoided.

Now, the case of Humpty functions in the background of the current debate in some significant ways. For Jerrold Levinson, MI's supposed inability to provide a sufficient reply to the problem has served as one of his primary motivations for developing the hypothetical version of intentionalism.<sup>185</sup> Levinson's version is able to avoid the problem with ease, since by identifying utterance meaning with the best hypothesis made by an appropriately informed audience, HI can avoid utterance meaning from collapsing into utterer's meaning. For if utterer's meaning, that is, what the author intended, fails to coincide with the attribution made by the appropriately informed audience, the utterance meaning of the work is determined by the latter and not the former. This avoids the conclusion that arguably would be implied by Humpty Dumpty-ism.<sup>186</sup>

While acknowledging the actuality of the problem of Humpty Dumpty for MI, its supporters have been relatively optimistic about the prospects of MI avoiding a slippage into Humpty-Dumpty-ism. Moreover, it seems that they see a successful answer to the problem to imply a more substantial consequence. That is, since one of the main counterarguments HI has addressed to MI is that the view cannot overcome the problem of Humpty Dumpty, a successful answer to it may be seen to have a significant implication for the debate between HI and MI as a whole. That is, MI's ability to accommodate Humpty Dumpty-ism suggests that of the two it is precisely that approach to interpretation which should be favored, for HI involves problematic features that MI can avoid.<sup>187</sup>

Below, I shall first introduce some qualifications supporters of MI have introduced, which, in their opinion, allows the modest intentionalist position to successfully accommodate

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<sup>185</sup> Levinson, for example, argues that one of the advantages HI has over MI is that it manages to preserve the "intuitive difference between what ends up being *said* (or conveyed) in a complex discourse situation, whether literary or non-literary, and what some agent was *trying* (or aiming) to say..." (Levinson 1996, 193).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. (186).

<sup>187</sup> For example, Gary Iseminger (1996) goes through various objections which have been raised against modest actual intentionalism, and argues that that view is able to meet all of them. After having shown this, he remarks that "the result is a stalemate between actual intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism..." (ibid. 323). Iseminger then moves on to draw attention to some factors which, in his view, modest actual intentionalism is in a better position to account for than hypothetical intentionalism, and which, thus, offer support for favoring MI over HI. The most important factor Iseminger cites in favor of MI is the fact that we have a conversational interest towards literary works, and this interest is, in his opinion, satisfied only by a grasp of the author's actual intention, not by the best hypothesis made by an appropriate reader. Iseminger concludes, "our conversational interests in literature will not be satisfied by anything less than the actual semantic intention of the author" (ibid. 325). Robert Stecker produces a similar kind of argument in favor of MI, or "the unified view" as Stecker calls his position. He singles out two factors which have been seen to motivate HI, one of which is precisely the supposition that HI is able overcome the problem of Humpty Dumpty more effortlessly than MI, that is, the fact that "work meaning can diverge from actually intended meaning" (Stecker 2003, 42). However, Stecker argues that neither factor cited by him undermines MI, for MI is, after all, able to accommodate those same factors. Like in Iseminger's account, the result at this point is a stalemate between MI and HI. Stecker then frames the debate between MI and HI in terms of their capacity to produce an appropriate account of utterance meaning, that is, "what someone *says* on an occasion of utterance," and produces various counterexamples to the effect that, in many cases, HI fails to give an interpretation of utterance meaning which we intuitively regard as most plausible. (Ibid. 44-47.)

the problem of Humpty Dumpty within this approach. I shall then move on to assess the strength of the replies offered by modest intentionalists to Humpty Dumpty-ism by comparing those replies to Davidson's way of coping with this specific problem introduced earlier. It is, in fact, my belief that Davidson's analysis of the case is in many ways more successful than those found in the work of modest intentionalists. This conclusion is important for this study as a whole, for it indicates one way in which Davidson's views manage to increase the general credibility of the modest intentionalist position on interpretation.

### *There's a Nice Knockdown Argument for You: Donald Davidson and Modest Intentionalism*

Paisley Livingston has formulated the core of the modest intentionalist position aptly:

Very generally, moderate intentionalism is the view that often the actual maker(s)' attitudes and doings are responsible for some of a work's content, and as such are a legitimate target of interpretive claims; more specifically, some (but not all) artist's semantic and other intentions are relevant, even necessary, to some (but not all) valuable interpretive insights because such intentions are sometimes constitutive of the work's content.<sup>188</sup>

Since MI gives this kind of role to the actual intention of the author, it must provide some means for blocking Humpty Dumpty-ism, i.e., leave room for the possibility that the work does not mean what its author's actual intention was. Modest intentionalists are convinced that their version of intentionalism is capable of formulating an adequate response to this problem. The content of the replies modest intentionalists have given to the problem of Humpty Dumpty overlap with each other in significant ways. Although utterance meaning, that is, the meaning of the work, should be identified with the actual intention of the author, Humpty's claim to be able to mean whatever he likes is pre-empted by setting certain boundaries on what it is possible to mean. Humpty is seen to have failed in meaning what he intended precisely because he went beyond these boundaries.

Livingston formulates the content of these boundaries by maintaining that successful intentions have to be "within natural and logical limits," while Robert Stecker expresses a similar idea by saying that the intention has to receive an uptake, that is, the intention has to be supported by the structure of the text or work.<sup>189</sup> If these requirements are not met, the work does not mean what the author intended the work to mean. Noël Carroll has most explicitly denied that modest intentionalism falls into the problem of Humpty Dumpty:

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<sup>188</sup> Livingston (1996, 627).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. (628), Stecker (2003, 14-17), Stecker (2006, 429-430).



Modest actual intentionalism blocks Humpty Dumpty-ism because even if Humpty Dumpty intends “glory” to mean “knockdown argument”, that is not a meaning that the textual unit (“glory”) can have. The intentions of authors that the modest actual intentionalist takes seriously are only those intentions of the author that the linguistic/literary unit can support (given the conventions of language and literature).<sup>190</sup>

Now, at first sight, this short exposition of the disclaimers modest intentionalists have introduced for blocking that view from slipping into Humpty Dumpty-ism seems to show that modest intentionalist reactions to the problem of Humpty Dumpty involves an attitude to the problem similar to that present in Davidson’s views, that is, while the actual intention is indeed the most essential factor in determining meaning, there must, nevertheless, be certain constraints on what can be meant, and if the author goes beyond these limits he has failed to mean what he intended. However, once a deeper account of Davidson’s analysis of the case of Humpty Dumpty has been provided, some significant differences begin to emerge.

Davidson’s account of the case of Humpty Dumpty shows insufficiencies especially in Noël Carroll’s attempt to accommodate the morals of Humpty Dumpty-ism within the modest intentionalist position. That is, if the skepticism towards the role of conventions adopted by Davidson in his later philosophy of language is accepted, conventions cannot pose such limits on intentions as are invoked by Carroll in his response to the threat of Humpty Dumpty-ism. By arguing that Humpty’s utterance did not mean what he intended Carroll does arrive at the right conclusion. However, he ultimately arrives at it for the wrong reasons, for the ultimate reason for the shortfall of Humpty’s intended meaning is neither that he broke the conventions of language nor that “the textual unit” does not support the intended meaning given the conventions of language, but because Humpty did not conform to the requirement of interpretability, i.e., he did not give Alice the required clues for gearing her passing theory. For this reason, Humpty’s intention cannot be considered reasonable and, thus, on the Davidsonian account, his utterance does not mean what he intended it to mean. In this respect, Carroll’s mistake is similar to that of Searle’s. With a different kind of stage setting on Humpty’s part which would have provided Alice with a sufficient number of clues for reaching understanding, his utterance could truly have managed to mean what he intended. That kind of situation is possible even in the case where the conventions of language would not have undergone any kinds of significant transformations.

Livingston’s answer to the case of Humpty Dumpty does not appear that successful either. The insufficiencies apparent in it are pretty much the same as those troubling Carroll’s account. Its shortage is even enhanced by the fact that the contents of those limits Livingston describes as natural and logical remain unclear. What does it mean for an intention to be

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<sup>190</sup> Carroll (2001/2000, 198).

within natural limits? Are there some kinds of standards for what it is natural to mean? Now, be that as it may, it nevertheless seems that the restrictions Livingston is after are similar in kind to those Carroll introduces. That, in turn, suggests that the perspective on the case of Humpty provided by Davidson is able to reveal shortcomings similar to those brought to light in the case of Carroll. That is, in both cases it is overlooked how multifarious those factors are that come into play when the success of intention is considered.

One shortcoming in the replies Livingston and Carroll have presented to the case of Humpty Dumpty is that they fail to take into account the possibility that “there’s glory for you” could, in fact, mean “there’s a nice knockdown argument for you.” Especially Carroll’s answer to this question seems definitive. Since the conventions of language cannot give that textual unit the meaning of the latter, this does not seem possible, or at least that would require a substantial transformation in our linguistic practices. However, the Davidsonian position shows that for “there’s glory for you” to mean “there’s a nice knockdown argument for you” our linguistic conventions need not undergo any substantial revolutions. Support for this claim is provided by Samuel Wheeler’s assessment of the situation. In his discussion on the relevance of Davidson’s ideas for the case of Humpty Dumpty, Wheeler imagines a scenario where Humpty can be considered to have succeeded in meaning what he intended, that is, equating “knockdown argument” with “glory.” From a Davidsonian standpoint this kind of conclusion may be allowed in cases where it is possible to consider the intention to make “knockdown argument” mean “glory” reasonable. In Wheeler’s opinion, this may even be allowed in cases where the receivers fail to catch the intended meaning.

The case imagined by Wheeler is different from the original case in that in this case Humpty, in fact, does believe for specific reasons that the actual audience has the ability to grasp his intention to make “knockdown argument” mean “glory.” Yet, despite Humpty having this belief his audience, ultimately, fails to do so. The important difference to the original case, however, is that in this case, Humpty’s intention can, for a variety of reasons, be considered reasonable, and thus there is no point in denying that Humpty’s utterance meant what he intended. Wheeler argues for this conclusion as follows:

[Even] if Humpty was deluded about his audience, and had some unusual correlation in mind – for instance, that in his favourite novel, “glory” occurred in the same position as “knockdown argument” but on a verso of the page, and this seemed to Humpty something everyone would notice – then we could say that Humpty’s communication attempt was meaningful, but unsuccessful.<sup>191</sup>

Although the attempt to communicate was in this case unsuccessful, this does not deprive Humpty’s utterance from the meaning he intended it have, for in the case imagined by

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<sup>191</sup> Wheeler (2003, 201).

Wheeler, Humpty's linguistic behavior can be said to have conformed to the requirement of interpretability.

The important conclusion this discussion implies is that for Humpty to succeed in making "knockdown argument" mean "glory" requires no transformations either in linguistic conventions or in the natural and logical limits the language involves. It may only require a transformation on some particular, individual and perhaps unique feature on the basis of which the intended meaning may be considered reasonable, encompassing such elements that are perhaps shared only by those who make up the linguistic situation in which a particular novel meaning for an old linguistic item is intended. It is precisely this aspect involved in Davidson's analysis of the case of Humpty Dumpty which sets it apart from the replies offered by Carroll and Livingston respectively.

The way in which Davidson's account of the relationship between conventions and meaning departs from the analyses offered by Livingston and Carroll may be further illuminated by observing certain factors coming up in those texts by Davidson, in which the problems of literary language and interpretation are explicitly considered. Given the way in which his later philosophy of language functions in the background of the ideas Davidson puts forward in these texts, it is not surprising that Davidson does not see a substantial discontinuity between literary language and ordinary uses of language. Both are characterized by the specific kind of dialectics between prior and passing theory presented previously in this chapter, the only difference being that the distances between the different points of the interaction are lengthened. That is, while in ordinary discourse speakers are able to form a picture of how their interlocutors are prepared to interpret their utterances relatively easily, authors can only make more or less accurate hunches about how their readers are equipped to interpret. Nevertheless, the differences between the two ways of using language are more matters of degree than of kind.

Most importantly for my purposes, Davidson maintains that the requirement of interpretability must have a force in the case of literature similar to the one he assumes it has in the case of more mundane uses of language. Since "we cannot intend what we know to be impossible," literary uses of language require a specific kind of interaction between the author and reader.<sup>192</sup> Authors cannot ignore how their readers are prepared to interpret their utterances, for the intention to mean something must be formed through the possibility that it can be interpreted in the intended way. Moreover, since the reasonableness of the intended meaning, and its success thereof, involves this kind of relationship to the reader's prospects of understanding, intending a specific, novel meaning for a familiar utterance or inventing a completely new one can be a highly fine-grained and delicate process. That is, its success requires that the author has the ability to create the kind of stage setting against which the reader can recognize the intended meaning. Otherwise, the attempt at novelty falls short. The

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<sup>192</sup> Davidson (2005/1989, 147).

discussion above, however, implies that reference to conventions or to some other sorts of limits with a specified content cannot inexhaustibly explain what this sort of reasonability ultimately involves.

The decisive factors serving to separate Davidson's views from those of Livingston's and Carroll's emerge well from Davidson's example concerning the prose of James Joyce. For Davidson, Joyce is a primary example of what the interaction between author and reader can, in the end, involve. Davidson writes:

Joyce draws on every resource his readers command (or that he hopes they command, or thinks they should command), every linguistic resource, knowledge of history, geography, past writers, and styles. He forces us both to look at and listen to his words to find the puns and fathom the references.<sup>193</sup>

Davidson, in fact, draws a connection between James Joyce and the case of Humpty Dumpty. Since Humpty tried to form novel meanings for familiar utterances, he resembles Joyce in this respect. However, while they both sought to be innovators of language, only Joyce succeeded. This is because unlike the latter, Joyce gave subtle, often hard to crack clues as to how his utterances should be interpreted. Humpty, on the other hand, was an unsuccessful innovator, because he did not provide the required clues. He was not an innovator because his utterances were not, ultimately, meaningful language. But, "it's clear that when Joyce was flying by the net of language, he did not intend to leave us entangled."<sup>194</sup> As the longer quote from Davidson shows, the disentanglement from the web weaved by Joyce can involve highly delicate and unique pieces of knowledge. However, since these clues are hard to dig up "as much is demanded from the reader as of the author." "By fragmentating familiar languages and recycling the raw material Joyce provokes the reader into involuntary collaboration...."<sup>195</sup>

Joyce's works shoot us into a "verbal exile," but if it is accepted that the result of the collaboration is meaningful language, it is strange what Livingston means by his contention that the intention has to be "in natural and logical limits." Is Joyce's language in these limits? And if it is, what does this mean? On what is the assessment of naturalness and logicalness based? But it is even more likely that Carroll's insistence on the Humpty Dumpty case cannot be an adequate one because if we believe Davidson, the reason why Humpty could not have meant what he intended was not the reason given by Carroll. Conventions do not play an indispensable role in judgments concerning the success of intentions, but rather that process may ultimately involve such unique features not accounted for by the sorts of features invoked by Carroll and Livingston respectively.

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. (153).

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. (156-157).

Now, if the problem of Humpty Dumpty truly occupies the kind of place within the intentionalist debate currently carried out in analytic aesthetics as was suggested above, Davidson's ability to embrace that case in a more satisfactory way than the foremost modest intentionalists are able to can be seen to have some interesting impacts not only on that discussion, but on analytic philosophy of interpretation in general. If Davidson provides the most convincing account of how to accommodate the case of Humpty Dumpty to the modest intentionalist position, it seems that it is worth exploring whether Davidson's views can make an even more wide-ranging contribution to this approach to interpretation. In the brief last section of this chapter, I shall draw attention to another aspect of Davidson's philosophy, which, in my view, proves valuable for an intentionalist theory of interpretation.

### **3. Conclusions: Why Davidson?**

Given how important a role modest intentionalists ascribe to authorial intention in interpretation, it is strange to observe how seldom they have tried to analyze that mental phenomenon in more detail. Rather, modest intentionalists usually back up their views on interpretation only with such brief comments as "an intention is made up of beliefs and desires,"<sup>196</sup> and that they are "psychological states having both a representational and an attitudinal dimension."<sup>197</sup> Intentions have also been considered to be "mental states having semantic contents, various psychological functions, and practical consequences."<sup>198</sup>

Davidson's views prove valuable for the modest intentionalist position for it provides a whole new framework in which to consider the author's intentions. That is, the holistic view of human mentality which underlie various parts of Davidson's work and which he was considered to have gradually developed into a full-fledged account of the relationship between mind and world in the previous parts of this chapter. While it is hard to disagree with the formulations with which modest intentionalists have described intentions, the framework they provide, nevertheless, falls short of the framework in which Davidson's holism inserts intention into and the issues it allows the question regarding the role of authorial intentions in interpretation to be connected with.

On a basic level, the novel supplementation which holism provides for an intentionalist outlook on interpretation is that it indicates the way intentions are intertwined with other mental states and propositional attitudes of an agent. That is, holism maintains that there are "no beliefs without many related beliefs, no beliefs without desires, no desires without

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<sup>196</sup> Carroll (2001/1992, 176).

<sup>197</sup> Livingston (1996, 619).

<sup>198</sup> Livingston (1998, 831). Livingston (2005, chapter 1) is one notable exception.

beliefs, no intentions without both beliefs and desires.”<sup>199</sup> Now, the reason why I believe this aspect of Davidson’s views is significant for the modest intentionalist position on interpretation is that it reveals how many influential criticisms of intentionalism rest on some sturdy and wrong-headed prejudices about this mental phenomenon. This is, to my mind, especially the case with hermeneutic criticisms of that interpretive position which I shall consider in the following chapter.

That Davidson’s holism may make precisely this kind of contribution to the philosophy of interpretation has not escaped everybody’s notice. Samuel Wheeler, for example, maintains that the decisive difference between the intentionalism involved in E.D. Hirsch’s literary theory and in Davidson’s views is that the holistic conception of the mind formulated by Davidson is an essential element of the more general theory of interpretation and understanding offered by him. Wheeler locates the significance of this view in the same place as I did above. That is, for Wheeler the view of intention involved in Davidson’s account implies that it is wrong to construe this mental phenomenon as a “*logoi*,” a phrase Wheeler adopts from contemporary French philosophy, which is assumed to be something lying behind words and other mental states and to which other people have no assured and direct access. Holism challenges this view by maintaining that intentions are “ascribed along with beliefs, desires, and meanings of utterances,” which emphasizes the impossibility of explicating the content of one mental state without reference to others and the way “no one notion is the bedrock from which the other notions are constructed or understood.”<sup>200</sup>

While most current intentionalists of any bent have sought to distance themselves from Hirsch, they have not done so in relation to the difference invoked by Wheeler. The criticisms contemporary intentionalists have addressed to Hirsch have concerned the way in which the relationship between meaning and intention is drawn in his theory. In fact, the criticism that has appeared has been strangely conflictive; for some Hirsch’s intentionalism is too extreme, while for others it is not extreme enough. In other words, Hirsch is either seen not to leave enough room for the distinction between what was intended and what the work ends up meaning or to leave too much room between the two.<sup>201</sup>

Nevertheless, the important thing for my argument is that the ultimate relevance of the difference drawn attention to by Wheeler for the intentionalist position has not been extensively investigated. This is what I intend to do in the two following chapters. There the prospects of a form of intentionalism drawing on Davidson’s holism are weighed in relation to the intentionalist skepticisms Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Richard Rorty’s work on interpretation and on the place of literature in our contemporary world embody. It is my belief that precisely the form of intentionalism built upon Davidson’s views on language

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<sup>199</sup> Davidson (2001, 126).

<sup>200</sup> Wheeler (2003, 189).

<sup>201</sup> Criticism of the former kind see Tolhurst (1979), Levinson (1996), and for the latter see Juhl (1980), Knapp & Michaels (1985), Irwin (1999).

and mind manages to serve as a highly convincing response to the critical tone the work of these two philosophers have taken towards intentionalist accounts of interpretation, and this is in part due to the holistic outlook on the human mind and interpretation Davidson provides.

What is characteristic of philosophy is  
the piercing of that dead crust of tradition  
and convention, the breaking of those fetters  
which bind us to inherited preconceptions,  
so as to attain a new and broader way of looking at things.

Waismann "How I see Philosophy" (1956)

### **III Understanding Meaning, Experiencing Significance: Towards a Critique of Hans-Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutics**

E.D. Hirsch's position within literary theory and philosophy of interpretation is hardly enviable. From the account of the current intentionalist debate of analytic aesthetics presented at the end of the previous chapter, it becomes apparent that most of the intentionalist theories currently supported in it are formulated as a critical response to Hirsch's views. In contemporary hermeneutics the critical tone towards Hirsch's theory has, in turn, been even stronger. While especially modest intentionalists in analytic aesthetics agree with Hirsch's main theoretical point regarding the position of the author's intentions in interpretation, followers of Hans-Georg Gadamer's thinking tend to adopt a much more unfavorable attitude towards his theory and the ideas it supports.<sup>202</sup>

The disapproving tone characterizing the relationship of Gadamer's followers to Hirsch's literary theory may be connected with the transformation philosophical hermeneutics has been considered to have undergone especially due to the influence that Gadamer's views have had on the development of this tradition. While hermeneutists working in the age of Romanticism took as their goal the formation of rigorous methodological procedures with which to ground the objectivity of the human sciences, Gadamer, following his teacher Martin Heidegger, insisted that this aim concealed much more fundamental questions. For these two, hermeneutics was not primarily a methodological discipline. Instead, it concerned the conditions of understanding as such; that is, in their hands hermeneutics became a discipline that sought to uncover the conditional factors lying beneath the individual acts interpreters take. The reason why the readdressing of the focus of hermeneutics apparent in Gadamer's approach has been considered so fundamental is that the factors drawn attention to in it, such as the historically conditioned nature of our understanding, by no means leave the methodological approach unaffected, but, ultimately, undermine its foundations, for example by challenging the view of meaning the methodological school assumes.<sup>203</sup> Hirsch was

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<sup>202</sup> For example, Richard Palmer writes that "the *ease* with which Hirsch ignores the implications of understanding theory and philosophy of language suggests that the specialization he proposes for hermeneutics is inadvisable" (1969, 63-65). My italics.

<sup>203</sup> For example, Gadamer himself considers Heidegger's work "a decisive turning point" in hermeneutic theory. Gadamer (2004/1960, 293); Gadamer (1973/1960, 277). I shall henceforth refer to the English translation of



primarily concerned with questions related to the grounds of validity in understanding similar to those Schleiermacher and Dilthey were preoccupied with. As a consequence his approach to hermeneutics was considered to be in danger of turning the hands of hermeneutics back in time to Romanticism, from whose untenable tenets Gadamer was simultaneously seen to redeem the discipline.<sup>204</sup>

Another factor that could explain the unsympathetic character of the relationship contemporary hermeneutists have adopted towards Hirsch's literary theory is that it includes as an essential element a substantial critique of Gadamer's hermeneutics. In 1965, Hirsch published a review of Gadamer's *magnum opus Wahrheit und Methode* in *The Review of Metaphysics*, which was perhaps among the first of its kind in English. There he presents a detailed account of Gadamer's work, criticizing it, for example, for failing to deal with the problem of the grounds of validity in interpretation in a successful manner and for overlooking a crucial distinction between the meaning and significance of a work.

Both criticisms are related to the central tenets of Hirsch's own literary theory. His primary interest concerns the validity of interpretations, that is, what could serve as a standard against which the comparative validity of different interpretations may be assessed. Hirsch finds the question of validity particularly important for he believes that the very meaningfulness of criticism and interpretation rests on the assumption that a comparative judgment between different interpretations is possible. As noted in the introduction, Hirsch thinks that his period was characterized by "a heavy and largely victorious assault on the sensible belief that a text means what its author meant." While Hirsch considers it "a task for the historian of culture" to uncover the reasons that led to this situation,<sup>205</sup> from a more theoretical point of view it meant that the question regarding the grounds of validity was no longer considered a pressing one. This is because "once the author had been ruthlessly banished as the determiner of his text's meaning, it very gradually appeared that no adequate principle existed for judging the validity of an interpretation."<sup>206</sup> For Hirsch, this change in attitude had especially burning implications, for, as we saw, in his opinion, without any kind of sense of what the validity of interpretations ultimately amounts to, the very meaningfulness of interpretation is in danger of being undercut.<sup>207</sup>

Hirsch singles out Gadamer's theory as a prime example of an approach to interpretation that is incapable of accounting for the issue of validity in a successful manner. By denying that the meaning of a work could exhibit any kind of determinacy or permanency,<sup>208</sup> Hirsch believes that Gadamer is unable to provide a firm enough principle for comparing and

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*Wahrheit und Methode* with the abbreviation *TM*, and to the German edition I have used with *WM*. See also Palmer (1969, 33-34, 64-65), Warnke (1987, 1-3).

<sup>204</sup> Palmer (1969, 46-47).

<sup>205</sup> Hirsch (1967, 1).

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.* (3).

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.* (26).

<sup>208</sup> *TM*, 296; *WM*, 280.

assessing the validity of different, possibly conflicting interpretations. Thus, Gadamer's views are ultimately at variance with the factors on which the meaningfulness of interpretation, in Hirsch's opinion, rest.<sup>209</sup>

In the second case, Hirsch claims that Gadamer's theory is plagued by a conceptual confusion. This is the distinction between meaning and significance that is of the utmost importance for Hirsch.<sup>210</sup> He explains this difference as follows:

*Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.<sup>211</sup>

In other words, when Gadamer describes understanding as a process where the horizons of the text and that of the interpreter fuse he should not, in Hirsch's opinion, have drawn the conclusion that as a result of this activity the meaning of the text under interpretation is inevitably transformed, but that rather this transformation concerns its significance. For Hirsch, meaning is determined by the author's intentions, and is thus permanent, while the significance of the text is essentially "boundless," changing as different relationships to that meaning are formed.<sup>212</sup> In Hirsch's opinion, "failure to consider this simple and essential distinction has been the source of enormous confusion in hermeneutic theory."<sup>213</sup>

Now, there are two reasons why I have decided to take up Hirsch's criticism of Gadamer in this thesis. The first is that Gadamer's theory is one of the most powerful criticisms of the approach to understanding and interpretation this study in general defends, that is, intentionalism. It should thus be included in any work that tries to defend an intentionalist approach to interpretation in as substantial a manner as I attempt to do here. Hirsch's literary theory has also been the main representative of an intentionalist approach to interpretation and understanding against which some contemporary hermeneutists have formulated their critical stance towards intentionalist views.

The second reason for choosing Hirsch's criticism as a touchstone from which Gadamer's hermeneutics is approached in this chapter is simple: it is my belief that Hirsch's criticism is mostly insightful, and that it manages to uncover real problems in Gadamer's hermeneutics. However, rather than recapitulating the points Hirsch's criticism makes, the strength of Gadamer's theory will be considered by investigating the critical replies Gadamer's followers and commentators have presented to Hirsch's criticism. These are introduced in the first section, while in the two sections following it, these replies are first connected with a fundamental element of Gadamer's hermeneutics, the concept of play, and they are then

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<sup>209</sup> Hirsch (1967, 249-254).

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. (255).

<sup>211</sup> Ibid. (8).

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

assessed in relation to a concrete example, Thomas Adés' *America: A Prophecy*. The reason why this particular piece of music serves as an illuminating example for assessing Gadamer's views on the conditions of understanding, as well as the replies his followers have made to Hirsch's criticism, is that it is a work on which history has had a fundamental effect. The question that becomes relevant with regard to the strength of Gadamer's position is whether that effect should also be considered to condition our understanding of the piece in a way that it is irreversibly transformed. The question concerning the accuracy of Gadamer's analysis of the conditions of understanding is addressed in the two following sections as well, however, this time from different angles. In these sections a critical conclusion will be presented similar to the one emerging from the analysis of Adés' *America* offered. Our understanding should not be considered to be historically conditioned in the way Gadamer and his followers have presumed.

This conclusion is an important element in the defense of intentionalism which emerges through the critical discussion of Gadamer's views in this chapter. This is because, as the replies made by Hirsch's critics show, the claim that our understanding is historically structured in the way Gadamer's hermeneutics depicts has served as the foundational premise of the criticism hermeneutics in general has addressed to intentionalist views of interpretation. This interrelatedness between the two issues implies that the criticism of intentionalism hermeneutics involves becomes weaker the less convincing Gadamer's account of understanding can be shown to be, and this is something I attempt to demonstrate in the first parts of this chapter. Although one might succeed in undermining this part of Gadamer's hermeneutics, one obstacle, nevertheless, remains in place. It seems that another reason why intentionalist approaches to interpretation have not found their supporters within contemporary hermeneutics is because that view is still tightly associated in the minds of hermeneutists taking their inspiration from Gadamer's work with forms of hermeneutics reigning at the age of Romanticism and with their "pantheistic" undercurrents.<sup>214</sup>

The critical account of Gadamer's hermeneutics presented in the first parts of this chapter will not draw extensively on Donald Davidson's views, that account being more based on an elaboration of Hirsch's criticism of Gadamer. However, the holistic view of meaning and interpretation provided in Davidson's later texts will be highly relevant for the concluding parts of this chapter, where I discuss the assumptions hermeneutists have assumed that intentionalist approaches to interpretation involve. It is my belief that the connection between holism and intentionalism which may be drawn on the basis of Davidson's work reveals some decisive shortcomings in the critical stance towards intentionalism which underlies a large part of hermeneutics. To introduce Davidson's views to the context of hermeneutics is nothing new, for there is a growing literature where parts of Davidson's work, such as the rationality assumptions involved in the principle of charity and the dialogical character of

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<sup>214</sup> *TM*, 337, *WM*, 324.

understanding, are connected with Gadamer's views on similar topics.<sup>215</sup> In time Davidson in particular came to acknowledge the affinities between his views and those of Gadamer.<sup>216</sup> Yet, in this literature the relevance of Davidson's views concerning the role of authorial intention in interpretation has not been considered that thoroughly. This omission is particularly significant, for it is my belief that an intentionalist theory built on the view of the human mind inherent in Davidson's texts manages to overcome precisely those problematic assumptions some contemporary hermeneutists have thought intentionalist approaches to interpretation involve.

## **1. Hermeneutic Replies to E.D. Hirsch's Criticism of Gadamer's Hermeneutics**

The critical responses made by Gadamer's followers and commentators to Hirsch's criticism have taken two forms. The first aims to question its validity by pointing out certain insufficiencies in Hirsch's interpretation of Gadamer, while the second argues that it is not Hirsch's theory that succeeds in uncovering problems in Gadamer's theory, but rather the other way around.

As noted above, Gadamer's hermeneutics tries to distance itself from the romantic hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey that were concerned with establishing a methodological foundation for the human and interpretive sciences. Although Gadamer does see a kind of "narrowness" in the attempt to construct methodological principles for interpretation, he does not find the endeavor wholly pointless.<sup>217</sup> Gadamer's argument is rather that too much focus on methodological questions with regard to the human sciences runs the risk of concealing more fundamental questions related to interpretation and understanding that need to be reflected upon.<sup>218</sup>

This demand for opening up a new approach to interpretation and understanding has its origin in the effect that Heidegger's thinking had on Gadamer's approach to interpretation and understanding. For one thing, Heidegger criticizes hermeneutical theories that are concerned with methodological questions. Interpretation and understanding should not be primarily viewed as particular acts that people take towards objects possessing meaning, as methodological approaches assume. Rather, the task of hermeneutics, as Heidegger sees it, is to reveal the way in which interpretation and understanding are much more fundamental elements of the being-in-the-world of human beings.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Føllesdal (1979); Ramberg (1989, 138-142), Taylor (2002); McDowell (2002); Malpas (2002); Ramberg (2003), Brandom (2004); Child (2006).

<sup>216</sup> Davidson (2005/1997).

<sup>217</sup> *TM*, 16, 158-159; *WM*, 15, 158-159. Compare Palmer (1969, 67, 164).

<sup>218</sup> *TM*, xxv-xvii; *WM*, xv-xix,

<sup>219</sup> Grondin (1994, 106-110), Malpas (2005, sec. 2.2.), Gjesdal & Ramberg (2005, sec. 5).

This is a component of Heidegger's work that Gadamer's hermeneutics seeks to expand and what, ultimately, has been seen to set it apart from methodological accounts of hermeneutics.<sup>220</sup> That is, its primary goal is to reveal the ontological conditions of understanding, what makes individual acts of understanding possible and what thus precedes every such individual act.

Gadamer's way of readdressing the focus of hermeneutics is precisely that feature of Gadamer's thinking which Hirsch has been considered to have overlooked. Drawing attention to this kind of insufficiency in Hirsch's criticism is especially important for Richard Palmer's response. According to him, by focusing on establishing norms for valid interpretation, and by addressing Gadamer's views from this viewpoint, Hirsch precisely fails to notice that he is not concerned with the same question, which is important for the strand of hermeneutics taking its inspiration from Heidegger and Gadamer. This misapprehension is one of the reasons why Hirsch's criticism ultimately falls short. That is, Hirsch's critical points are off the mark, for they approach Gadamer's theory in false terms.<sup>221</sup>

In a letter to Emilio Betti, who raises critical points against Gadamer's theory similar to those Hirsch puts an emphasis on, Gadamer replies that his hermeneutics is not concerned with finding a method with which the validity and objectivity of interpretation may be assured, but to "describe *what is*."<sup>222</sup> Here, Gadamer makes the same claim against Betti that Palmer addresses to Hirsch. Because the leading theme of Gadamer's work is not concerned with the problem of validity at all, it is erroneous to approach Gadamer's theory from this angle. Joel Weinsheimer makes similar points with respect to the status of Hirsch's criticism as well. He summarizes its drawbacks by saying that because of the differences characterizing the respective concerns of Gadamer and Hirsch, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is left "untouched" by the latter's critical points.<sup>223</sup>

The replies to Hirsch's criticism also raise some important theoretical issues for consideration. Gadamer's followers and commentators are not merely satisfied with pointing out that Hirsch ends up barking up the wrong tree. They also argue that the aspect of Gadamer's project which Hirsch overlooks undermines the possibility of establishing validity on the kind of foundation Hirsch's theory seeks. In particular, it calls into question the idea that the meaning of a text could be as determinate as Hirsch's intentionalism assumes. As Gadamer emphasizes, understanding never happens in a vacuum, but always against the backdrop of a certain tradition and historical setting. This backdrop forms the horizon for understanding, that is, the basis where it begins, as well as underdetermining the course it can ultimately take. The meaning of a text cannot possess such determinacy as is presumed in Hirsch's literary theory, for that meaning cannot be determined in isolation from the setting

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<sup>220</sup> Palmer (1969, 42).

<sup>221</sup> Ibid. (60-68).

<sup>222</sup> Ibid. (58).

<sup>223</sup> Weinsheimer (1991, 25).

the interpreter inhabits. Rather, the effect tradition and history has had on the interpreter's consciousness forms the horizon through which the meaning of the text under interpretation is determined. As Gadamer himself explains, "not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always productive activity as well."<sup>224</sup>

The mistakes allegedly inherent in Hirsch's criticism of Gadamer also indicate the relationship which has been seen to hold between the different forms of hermeneutics. Palmer thinks, for example, that there is no reason why the different forms of hermeneutics could not be thought to bring "to light different, but legitimate sides of the act of interpretation." Moreover, the factors uncovered by the ontological approach, such as the historically conditioned nature of understanding, have been widely considered to call into question various assumptions that the methodological approach rests on, such as the view of meaning it involves. Gadamer himself argues that with Heidegger "the whole idea of grounding itself underwent a total reversal."<sup>225</sup>

The second response to Hirsch's theory concerns the distinction between the meaning and significance of a text. Gadamer's emphasis on the historical nature of understanding yet again serves as a starting point for this response. Georgia Warnke has in particular considered the implications that Gadamer's account has for the distinction Hirsch claims Gadamer has overlooked. She turns the issue upside down. The fact that Gadamer's hermeneutics does not involve a distinction between meaning and significance should not be considered a drawback of the theory. Rather, when approached through the emphasis that Gadamer lays on the historical nature of understanding, it is Hirsch's theory and the distinction it involves which is called into question. As Warnke puts it, "it is important to note here that Gadamer's position does not merely overlook a distinction between understanding meaning and understanding significance; it *denies* one. On his view, we understand the meaning of a text, work of art, historical event *only in relation to our own situation*.... In other words we understand it only in light of its significance...."<sup>226</sup>

As an example to defend the claim that the distinction between meaning and significance cannot, indeed, be sustained, Warnke draws attention to the differences in the reception of *Huckleberry Finn* between readers in Twain's time and readers today. She argues that because of the growth in awareness of sexual minorities and racial stereotyping since Twain's time, present-day readers are bound to be more struck than readers of earlier times by certain features of the work related to these issues, such as the homosexual features apparent in the relationship between Jim and Huck depicted in the novel.<sup>227</sup> Because those elements that emerge from the work for the reader to consider have changed over time, the work will also

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<sup>224</sup> *TM*, 296; *WM*, 280.

<sup>225</sup> *TM*, 247; *WM*, 243.

<sup>226</sup> Warnke (1987, 68). Italics Warnke.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

be understood differently due to this change in horizon through which the work is approached. It is precisely due to this sort of transformation in readers' conceptual powers that the meaning of the work can only be understood through its significance, that is, the current situation of the reader "enters into the interpretation of meaning itself... into what the work 'really' says."<sup>228</sup> In other words, the horizontal character of interpretation makes the distinction between meaning and significance impossible to hold.

Now, the factors which come up in Warnke's Gadamerian response to the distinction between meaning and significance are the very same that are supposed to undermine the kind of presumption of determinacy and objectivity that methodological and intentionalist approaches to interpretation, such as the one offered by Hirsch, assume. Warnke summarizes these as follows:

On this analysis, then, the understanding of a work of art involves participation in its meaning.... Aesthetic experience, like historical understanding, involves a mediation of meaning with one's own situation, or what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons". By this he means the integration of one's understanding of a text or historical event with its relevance to one's own circumstances in such a way that an 'original' or 'intended' meaning cannot be differentiated from the meaning of the text or event for oneself. The meaning an object has it has as a fusion of the interpreter's perspective and the object.<sup>229</sup>

The problems in Hirsch's criticism are in the end twofold. Firstly, it suffers from a misguided understanding of the character of Gadamer's hermeneutic project. Secondly, because of this oversight, Hirsch also fails to apprehend how significant a challenge the readdressing of the focus of hermeneutics apparent in Gadamer's approach sets for his own literary theory and for any account, for that matter, highlighting the role of the author's intentions in interpretation.

## ***2. Spiel, Erfahrung, and the Conditions of Understanding***

A peculiar thing worth noting in the responses Gadamer's followers and commentators have made to Hirsch's criticism is that in a way they stack the cards against Hirsch. It is of course true that *if* Gadamer's account of the conditions of understanding is accurate, not only Hirsch's criticism of Gadamer is undermined, but the fundamentals of his own literary theory as well. The question regarding the truthfulness of the analysis of understanding Gadamer's hermeneutics involves, however, still remains undecided. For example, Hirsch himself does not share the kind of emphasis that is laid on the historical nature of understanding by Gadamer. Hirsch, in fact, claims that that view "contains inner conflicts and inconsistencies"

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. (68-69).

which none of the “masters” preceding Gadamer “would have allowed to pass into print.”<sup>230</sup> For Hirsch, “the doctrine of radical historicity is ultimately a dogma, an idea of reason, an act of faith.”<sup>231</sup>

The account of Thomas Adés’ *America: A Prophecy* presented in the third section of this chapter will be the first of three reflections which are intended to support Hirsch’s assessment of the problems troubling Gadamer’s account of understanding. In this part, the basis especially for this first critical investigation will be laid by raising another fundamental element of Gadamer’s theory, the concept of play, with a focus on how that part of his hermeneutics is connected with the analysis of understanding it involves. For example, Flemming Lebech situates the analysis of the experience of art as a form of play offered by Gadamer at the very heart of Gadamer’s thinking. In his opinion, it “not only grounds Gadamer’s concept of experience; it is also one of the most important preconditions for his conception of the principle of the history of effect.... Thus, if one misunderstands the concept of play, one runs the risk of misunderstanding not only Gadamer’s concept of historicity, but also his concept of subject.”<sup>232</sup>

Both Gadamer’s concept of experience to which he refers with the German term *Erfahrung* and his principle of the history of effect belong to the most important ideas with which he seeks to track the conditions of our understanding. The way these are connected to Gadamer’s concept of play by Lebech suggests that through a more careful analysis of the structural similarities which Gadamer sees obtaining between the experience of art and playing it is possible to achieve a more detailed picture of how the conditions of understanding are, according to Gadamer, formed.

Gadamer’s motivation for describing the experience of art as a form of play stems from his critique of an approach to art which he thinks is dominated by an attitude of “aesthetic consciousness,” and which he finds unable to embrace certain features important for the experience of art. Gadamer claims that the dreariness of this approach follows from the subjectivist elements it involves which, ultimately, disconnects a work from everything in which that work “is rooted.”<sup>233</sup> Gadamer continues, “it practically defines aesthetic consciousness to say that it differentiates what is aesthetically intended from everything that is outside the aesthetic sphere.... The sovereignty of aesthetic consciousness consists in its capacity to make this aesthetic differentiation everywhere and to see everything aesthetically.”<sup>234</sup> Gadamer’s reason for finding this approach to art unsatisfactory is that it fails to account for “the historical nature of the human condition,” as well as for the “binding quality of the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art” in which “we learn to understand ourselves” and

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<sup>230</sup> Hirsch (1967, 247).

<sup>231</sup> Ibid. (256-257).

<sup>232</sup> Lebech (2006, 227).

<sup>233</sup> *TM*, 73; *WM*, 80.

<sup>234</sup> *TM*, 74; *WM*, 81.



in which “the discontinuity and atomism of isolated experiences” is sublated “in the continuity of our own existence.”<sup>235</sup>

In place of this attitude that Gadamer finds typical for theories of art reigning in his time, he offers an analysis in which the experience of art is seen to have a similar structure to play. What Gadamer finds especially fruitful in this analogy is that it manages to overcome the subjective implications the approach to art guided by aesthetic consciousness falls into. It might initially seem that a comparison to play does not appear to be the most adequate way to overcome the subjective elements of aesthetic experience, for the concept of play carries with it connotations of an active subject, that is, somebody plays with something or something. Gadamer thinks that a more detailed phenomenological account of playing, however, reveals that this alleged subjectivist nature of play turns out to be an illusion. That is, once we have grasped the specific way in which play exists independently of the consciousnesses of those who play it, we will also have arrived at a more satisfactory account of “the mode of being of the work of art itself” than a framework dominated by aesthetic consciousness is able to provide.<sup>236</sup>

In Gadamer’s opinion, those who are engaged in play are not the real subjects of play, but “play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play.”<sup>237</sup> Rather, the actions taken by individual players during the course of play make up the process through which play reaches presentation.<sup>238</sup> Gadamer thinks that the essential features of play may be uncovered by observing how the concept of play is metaphorically used in different contexts. For example, we speak of the play of light and the play of waves. What Gadamer thinks unites these metaphorical uses is a particular “to-and-fro movement” that “renews itself in constant repetition.” For Gadamer, this linguistic observation serves as “an indirect indication that play is not to be understood as something a person does... the actual subject of the play is obviously not the subjectivity of the individual... but the play itself.”<sup>239</sup>

While it is indeed necessary in order to make play wholly play that the player approaches it with an attitude of seriousness, thus requiring an element of subjectivity, ultimately, “the structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative....”<sup>240</sup> The to-and-fro movement that Gadamer regards as essential for play defines the “spirit” of each particular act of play that is in turn embodied differently in the case of different acts of play. In other words, the rules of a particular play, as well as the actions of one’s opponents and playmates creates a space in which play happens, and which determine a field of possible actions for the player to undertake. Precisely in this respect play exists independently of the consciousnesses of those who play it, that independence

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<sup>235</sup> *TM*, 83-84; *WM*, 92.

<sup>236</sup> *TM*, 102; *WM*, 97.

<sup>237</sup> *TM*, 103; *WM*, 97.

<sup>238</sup> *TM*, 103; *WM*, 97.

<sup>239</sup> *TM*, 104; *WM*, 98.

<sup>240</sup> *TM*, 105; *WM*, 100.

simultaneously indicating the specific primacy play has over its players. For Gadamer, the ultimate implication of this primacy is that “whoever ‘tries’ is in fact the one who is tried. The real subject of the game... is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself.”<sup>241</sup>

Now, even though Gadamer does not come back to his analysis of the experience of art as play in the rest of *Truth and Method*, it may, nevertheless, be seen to occupy a vital position within his theory, as for example Lebech’s reading suggests. The ultimate position of the concept of play within Gadamer’s hermeneutics is revealed by observing the way Gadamer dissociates the concept of experience he favors, that is, *Erfahrung*, from another form to which Gadamer refers with the German term *Erlebnis*. With the latter term Gadamer means precisely that form of experience which shares some crucial features with experiences guided by aesthetic consciousness, Gadamer, in fact, calling that approach “the aesthetics of *Erlebnis*.”<sup>242</sup> When Lebech claims that the concept of play “grounds Gadamer’s concept of experience” he is referring to the sense expressed by *Erfahrung*. Now, if experience in the sense of *Erlebnis* is contrasted with that form of experience Gadamer tries to capture with *Erfahrung*, and if Gadamer’s account of the experience of art as play is, in turn, meant to overcome the aesthetics of *Erlebnis* dominated by aesthetic consciousness, then *Erfahrung* and the concept of play indeed seem to become closely associated with each other. In particular, it seems that *Erfahrung* is intended to draw attention to those aspects of experience whose origins are found in the way tradition addresses the interpreter, and the concept of play tries to track the structure of that effect.

The centrality of *Erfahrung* for Gadamer’s hermeneutics is also amongst those elements of his theory that sets it apart from methodological approaches. Methodological forms of hermeneutics, in Gadamer’s opinion, assume tradition and the effect history has on our thinking to be a kind of obstacle that must be overcome so that interpretive objectivity may be guaranteed. But Gadamer thinks, moreover, that this sort of approach to human sciences not only overlooks the fact that the effect of history cannot be removed, but also that the attitude embodied in methodological thinking fails to consider the way in which we, in actual fact, do encounter tradition and the effect this encounter may in turn have on the course our understanding takes. That is to say, methodological forms of hermeneutics “treat the problem of understanding in a way that is far too one-sided,” because they fail to account for the way in which tradition addresses the interpreter.<sup>243</sup> Gadamer continues: “The truth is that historical understanding always implies that the tradition reaching us speaks into the present and must be understood in this mediation – indeed, *as* this mediation.”<sup>244</sup> Thus, it is not a surprise that

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<sup>241</sup> *TM*, 107; *WM*, 101-102.

<sup>242</sup> *TM*, 70; *WM*, 77.

<sup>243</sup> *TM*, 309; *WM*, 294.

<sup>244</sup> *TM*, 325; *WM*, 311. Italics Gadamer.

Gadamer claims that when analyzing historically effected consciousness, “we have to keep in mind... [that] it has the structure of *experience* (Erfahrung).”<sup>245</sup>

Now, if the concept of play truly has the kind of relationship with *Erfahrung* as suggested above, the analysis of the experience of art as a form of play offered by Gadamer may be seen to illuminate the way in which Gadamer presumes experience and historically effected consciousness to condition our understanding. Lebech’s reading of Gadamer’s theory yet again offers support for this kind of construal, for he claims that “in the same way as the rules of a game establish a field for the players, and provide instructions for the way in which they may behave and act while playing... the history of effect establishes a field within which historical individuals are orientated....”<sup>246</sup> In other words, tradition and history open up a space for the formation of understanding and interpretation, that space thus conditioning the form understanding can ultimately take. Since these structuring elements have a primacy over the consciousness of an individual interpreter, the position she occupies, as well as the horizon through which her understanding is formed, has a structure similar to the one characterizing the place the experiencer of art occupies in the case of Gadamer’s concept of play.

### **3. Is Our Understanding Truly Historically Conditioned?**

The connection between Gadamer’s concept of play and the analysis tracking the conditions of understanding offered by him not only gives a more detailed picture of the problems Hirsch’s criticism of Gadamer is thought to involve, but it also brings out those factors of Gadamer’s thinking which have challenged Hirsch’s literary theory. First, the concept of play has a fundamental role within Gadamer’s hermeneutics. This indicates that its primary concern is not to provide a detailed analysis of the grounds of validity, but to reveal the structure of understanding and the origins and character of those elements which are involved in its formation. Second, the meaning of a text cannot possess the kind of determinacy as is presumed by Hirsch. This is because that meaning cannot be construed independently of the historical context the interpreter inhabits and the horizon of understanding that gets formed through certain factors. It is the structure of these factors which Gadamer tries to capture with his concept of play. This is also the reason why the kind of distinction between meaning and significance offered by Hirsch cannot be sustained. In Georgia Warnke’s words, “the point is that historical experience changes the meaning historical events can have for us. Such experience is dialectical in Hegel’s sense in that both the object and our knowledge of it are transformed....”<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> *TM*, 341; *WM*, 329.

<sup>246</sup> Lebech (2006, 230).

<sup>247</sup> Warnke (1987, 27).

In the three following sections, I shall offer readings of certain phenomena which to my mind undermine the view that our understanding is historically conditioned to the degree Gadamer claims. While not lending direct support for an intentionalist approach to interpretation, those critical investigations can, nevertheless, be seen to call for a reconsideration of the position of intentionalism within hermeneutics. This is because the historically conditioned nature of our understanding is not only a factor intentionalist theories have been assumed to have overlooked, but acknowledging this feature as essential to our understanding has been seen to undermine the kind of foundationalism apparent in intentionalism. Now, if the analysis of understanding apparent in Gadamer's hermeneutics ultimately overemphasizes the role that history and tradition occupies in its formation, a fundamental pillar of the hermeneutic criticism of intentionalism crumbles.

### *Understanding and Experiencing Thomas Adés' America: A Prophecy after 9/11*

Thomas Adés' *America: A Prophecy* serves as a highly illuminating example by which to examine the view of interpretation and understanding in Gadamer's hermeneutics. It raises the question of the relationship Gadamer draws between the model of play and the analysis of the conditions of understanding offered by him. *America* is a work on which history has had a deep effect. That is, the form the play between the hearer and the work nowadays takes is very different from the form it took at the time of its premiere. It is my belief that a more detailed analysis of *America* raises the question whether the transformations characterizing the to-and-fro movement this play exhibits should be considered to have an effect on the conditions of our understanding in the way Gadamer's analysis implies.

Thomas Adés is among the foremost contemporary composers. Although still relatively young, Adés has already achieved a high reputation and great success, ranging from a commission for an opera from the Royal Opera House, to composing a work to celebrate the beginning of Sir Simon Rattle's tenure as the musical director of the Berlin Philharmonic. Together with his activities as a conductor and as a pianist, it is expected that Adés will one day to hold a position in British music life similar to the one Benjamin Britten once occupied.

At the end of the 1990s the New York Philharmonic Orchestra commissioned "messages for the millennium" from six contemporary composers, Adés among them. His contribution to this project of exploring the future of mankind at the next millennium through musical means was a piece called *America: A Prophecy*, composed for a large orchestra, chorus, and mezzo-soprano soloist, and set to ancient Spanish and Mayan texts, the latter appearing in English translations.

The piece is not that long, the recording conducted by the composer himself taking a little over 15 minutes. The piece is in two movements, the first containing music "full of incident,

full of violent contrasts” that portray the conflict between the peaceful Mayan culture and the Spanish invaders, while the shorter second movement can be viewed as an “elegiac coda” to the more extensive first movement, and to the clash between cultures depicted in it.

*America* begins with a “blissfully simple” rotating pattern of notes played by the flutes which serve as representations of Mayan music in the piece, although, in actual fact, no Mayan music has survived to be quoted. Very soon, the whole orchestra joins in with violent strikes from the wood wind, strings, and piano above which the brass play tense, scream-like noises. After 17 bars, the orchestra falls silent and the soloist makes her first entry with a long note “O my nation!” The musical material introduced in the beginning is then repeated and developed for some time with the soloist repeating her proclamation “O my nation! Prepare!” The music, then, becomes more restful while the same rotating series of notes may be heard on the flute as at the beginning set against a calm musical background created by the strings. This music accompanies the soloist who tells about the coming enemies (the Spanish), and as the music starts to gradually become nervous and violent she once more predicts that “they will burn all the land” and that the cities of the culture to be attacked will fall. The music is transformed into a grandiose climax in which the whole orchestra takes part with musical textures heard at the beginning battling against each other, eventually resulting in a “hyperalive” music. This music stands in stark contrast to the Mayan music of the beginning, thus bringing out the different attitudes characteristic of the two cultures whose clash the piece describes.

The beginning of the second movement is dominated by the soloist’s repeated lines “we shall burn.” Musically it is simpler compared to the music of the first movement. About three minutes from the beginning of the movement the music rises to “a cataclysmic climax.” After this, the music slowly fades away with the mezzo-soprano soloist repeating a single sentence “but know this, ash feels no pain.” The piece ends with the “chilling of ember to ash in four final chords.”<sup>248</sup>

It might still seem unclear what this description of *America*’s music has to contribute to an assessment of Gadamer’s account of understanding, the above description perhaps just indicating that describing music in words is one of the most difficult and even silliest things one can do. However, the interesting thing about the piece with regard to Gadamer’s position on understanding is really the text to which it is set. The thing is that it composes a story in which a course of events is depicted that in significant respects resembles the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. One does not even have to bend the text in any way to see the connection between the two. First of all, just to draw attention to some similarities, at the beginning of *America* it is told that the enemy comes from the East, as was the case with 9/11 and they are, moreover, predicted to “burn all

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<sup>248</sup> Not being musically trained, I have had to rely on some external sources in the above account of Adés’ piece. Besides my own experience, the description is derived from two sources in particular, Fox (2004) and Griffiths (2004).

the land” and “all the sky,” which will ultimately lead to the “fall” of the cities of the culture to be attacked. These predictions are followed by battle music marking the preparation of the attack by the Spanish invaders that is set to the words “all the good soldiers who enlist in this war do not seek for rest. If they emerge victorious their pay will be eternal glory in heaven.” These lines bear an interesting similarity to 9/11, for the kind of after life promised for the Spanish soldiers exhibits an assurance similar to the reported motivation for the terrorists who crashed the abducted airplanes into the Twin Towers. In the second movement, in turn, the frightened soloist foresees that “we shall burn,” and above the chilling of ember to ash with which the piece ends, the chorus representing the invaders is heard singing “this is the victory by which our faith conquers the world.”

Now, the intriguing connections between the text of *America* and 9/11 bring out the reasons why the experience the piece elicits in a contemporary viewer has a different form from the one characterizing the experience the piece gave rise to in its premiere. Those factors which have acquired a role in structuring the hearer’s experience due to the terrorist attack and the disconcerting situation to which the world has fallen mostly because of it could not have shaped the character the premiere audience’s relationship to *America* took for the simple reason that these historical events were still in the future. In Gadamer’s terms, the to-and-fro movement which the play between the work and the hearer comprises has undergone a significant change due to these historical events.

However, it seems that Gadamer’s views imply an even more fundamental consequence. This is because if the model of play truly has such a relationship to Gadamer’s account of the conditions of understanding as was suggested above, Gadamer could argue that these historical events have altered the contemporary audience’s relationship to *America* so extensively that they will inevitably understand the piece in a different way than its premiere audience. Support for this sort of assessment may be found, for example, from his claim that “every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way.”<sup>249</sup> If that truly is the case and if the meaning of the work is “always co-determined... by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of *the objective course of history*,”<sup>250</sup> as Gadamer claims, then given the effect that 9/11 has had on our situation, it is arguable that Gadamer would also hold the conclusion that the meaning of *America* and our understanding of it has indeed changed.

Some reflections on the case of *America* do not, however, lend support for this kind of Gadamerian stance on the situation. While, for example, Christopher Fox acknowledges the fact that after the terrorist attacks, the text of *America* “has come to seem horribly prescient...,” his approach to the piece does not imply that the objective course of history would have coloured our relationship to the piece in a way that it would no longer be possible to understand the piece, for example, in the way Adés intended. By writing that “Adés’

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<sup>249</sup> *TM*, 296; *WM*, 280. My italics.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

intention was not to foretell, [but] rather to remind the inhabitants of the USA that they were not the first Americans, nor are they the only ones,”<sup>251</sup> and by considering this an essential element for the piece’s understanding, Fox’s approach does not seem to assume that the new light to which 9/11 has put the text of *America* would in some ways have had an irreversible effect on the horizon through which the piece and its text is nowadays understood.

*America* is not only a topical piece because of the connection between its text and 9/11, but also because it addresses issues that are in many ways significant for our present condition, none the least because of the terrorist attack itself. For example, in Paul Griffiths’ opinion, *America* has “to do with conflicts and balances between what is natural and primitive, elementary and what is highly developed. They are conflicts that involve anyone dancing to a beat delivered by electronic machines or worshipping a 2000 year-old god to polyphony....”<sup>252</sup> While Griffiths indeed thinks that a growth in the significance of *America* has occurred as a result of changes in the factors which constitute our contemporary condition, his approach too does not lend support for the view that due to this growth in significance, the conditions of understanding *America* would have significantly changed. Like Fox, he does acknowledge that *America* gained “unanticipated and disturbing actuality precisely 22 months” after its first performance. Yet, by claiming that the “prophetic anxieties” of the piece “are wider” than those that immediately concern 9/11 and the subsequent events it caused, his account of *America* does not support the conclusion that the effect of 9/11 on the reception of *America* would have been so extensive that our understanding of the piece would have undergone a substantial transformation.

The accounts of the case of *America* offered by Fox and Griffiths are important, for they may both be used to undermine the view of the effect a Gadamerian position would arguably hold 9/11 to pose on the interpreter’s horizon. They seem to achieve this ultimately in two ways. In their accounts the effect of history is in no way denied. On the contrary, both Griffiths and Fox acknowledge that certain historical events have significantly changed the character a contemporary listener’s relationship to *America* takes. The offered analyses, however, simultaneously deny that these changes should be thought to extend to concern our understanding of the piece. In other words, they offer support for rejecting the kind of connection between the model of play and the factors conditioning our understanding Lebech’s reading of Gadamer’s hermeneutics suggests. That is, every change occurring in the field where the play between the hearer and work happens should not be taken to result in a change in understanding.

Second, Fox’s and Griffiths’ approaches to *America* call into question the Gadamerian view on the role of the interpreter’s horizon in constructing the meaning of the piece. In both accounts, it is assumed that such distinctions can be made which the Gadamerian position does not allow room for. These distinctions especially concern the ways in which it is possible

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<sup>251</sup> Fox (2004).

<sup>252</sup> Griffiths (2004, 6).

for the work under interpretation to open up for the interpreter. A strict, but nevertheless often heard formulation of the hermeneutic view on the conditions of understanding maintains that the interpreter “cannot escape his own understanding.”<sup>253</sup> At least in the case of *America* this description contains a view in which history is ascribed too strong an effect on the horizon of the interpreter and the course her understanding can take. The object of interpretation is not as directly determined from the horizon of the interpreter as is assumed in this description.

Fox’s and Griffith’s accounts rather seem to lend support for making distinctions similar to those Hirsch is trying to capture with his distinction between the meaning and significance of a work. Hirsch in no way denies the effect of history and the possibility of change, but simply insists that that change should be thought to concern the significance of the piece, not its meaning. Do not the changes characterizing a present relationship to *America* precisely concern changes in its significance? That is, due to certain historical events, contemporary audience’s relationship to the meaning of *America* has undergone a transformation, which in turn explains differences in the significance *America* has for a contemporary audience and the significance it had for the audience attending its premiere. The possibility for making the distinction whose importance Hirsch emphasizes receives support from the fact that we can in general explain why a change should have occurred in the significance of *America*. Or as Hirsch himself puts it, “it is precisely because the meaning of the text is always the same that its relationship to a different situation is a different relationship.”<sup>254</sup> Does not the possibility for this kind of explanation imply that there is something *independent* in the work which is not determined by a contemporary interpreter’s horizon? The relationship that independent element has to the historical events which the piece owes the transformations in its significance to, not only explains why that transformation took place, but also why the significance of the piece underwent the kinds of transformations it, in actual fact, did. It is evident that the significance of *America* would nowadays be significantly different had 9/11 not taken place. This observation implies that it is in no way arbitrary what sort of significance a given artwork may acquire. In other words, since it is possible to point out those factors that explain the character *America*’s significance has nowadays taken, the piece’s identity must be more independent of the interpreter’s horizon than the Gadamerian analysis assumes. This conclusion in turn suggests that the distinction between meaning and significance drawn by Hirsch is much more warranted than Gadamer’s commentators and followers have thought.

This is the first step in the more substantial criticism of Gadamer’s account of understanding to be presented in this part of the chapter. That the distinction between meaning and significance proposed by Hirsch can survive the criticism Gadamer’s followers have addressed to it simultaneously undermines the view of understanding Gadamer’s hermeneutics embodies, for that criticism is based on the assumption of the superiority of

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<sup>253</sup> Palmer (1969, 51).

<sup>254</sup> Hirsch (1967, 255).



Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics over Hirsch's. The core of the criticism emerging from the case of *America* is that the model of play should not be thought to have the kind of relationship to understanding Gadamer assumes. It may indeed be the case that history has a deep effect on our encounters with artworks, but it is far from being clear that changes occurring as a result of it should be considered to condition our understanding in the kind of way the Gadamerian position assumes. However, other kinds of arguments have been presented for the view of understanding Gadamer's hermeneutics supports than those appealing to the connection drawn between the model of play and the conditions of understanding in it. I shall now turn to those arguments.

### *Art, Understanding, and the Modalities of History*

While in the hermeneutic literature, the relevance of Gadamer's account of history and tradition has been primarily considered with regard to the question of understanding, in Georgia Warnke's opinion, it has some important consequences for a host of other issues. She draws attention, for example, to the fact that Gadamer's analysis on the historicity of human nature does not merely pertain to the way the interpreter's horizon is constructed, but it may also be used to capture the constituent factors involved in an artist's activity. That is, like the interpreter, the artist's activity is inherently contextual by nature, having its roots in history and tradition in the sense that the past development of art forms a space in which an artist works, providing opportunities for certain kinds of artistic choices, while making others unattainable. Historical developments within the different arts pose a limit on the meanings that works may embody at a certain time and place, as well as on the factors through which their aesthetic character is formed. With this sort of view on the historicity of art as a basis Warnke, for example, argues that the radical nature often attributed to much contemporary art is partly an illusion. This is because the shocking character associated with some contemporary pieces is dependent on the art preceding those pieces, these kinds of works hence preserving a connection to past art after all. In other words, even though much contemporary art strives to disconnect itself from the history of art it, nevertheless, remains "part of the tradition since it depends upon the assumptions of the tradition for its effect."<sup>255</sup>

Despite this different emphasis, Warnke nevertheless sees the conditional factors involved in both activities to have a common origin. They are both good examples of what Gadamer calls "effective history" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), that is, "the operative force of the tradition over those that belong to it..."<sup>256</sup> In the case of the artist, history and the tradition of art constitute a field for the artist in which she can pursue her artistic goals, while for the

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<sup>255</sup> Warnke (1987, 78).

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

interpreter this embeddedness means that her approach to a particular work is conditioned by the tradition which she belongs to, as well as on what sorts of interpretations of the work under interpretation have been offered within that tradition.<sup>257</sup>

Warnke's way of extending Gadamer's notion of effective history reveals the ultimate scope of this phenomenon. By doing so, the extension offered by her is simultaneously intended to support the view of understanding Gadamer holds. That is, the more convincing Warnke's observations on the role of effective history in forming the setting for an artist's work is considered to be, the more convinced we should become of the truth of Gadamer's analysis regarding understanding.

The problem with Warnke's argument is not really that it contains an unconvincing description of the artist's activity. On the contrary, that part of the argument seems highly plausible. Rather, the problem with Warnke's way of drawing support for the Gadamerian stance on interpretation is that there is not, in fact, the kind of connection between the issues invoked in it as the argument assumes, that is, the artist's activity and the formation of the interpreter's horizon. One may, in other words, find Warnke's account of the historical conditions involved in the artist's work wholly acceptable, without this in any way committing one to the view that one's understanding is similarly conditioned.

An examination of art that undermines precisely the connection between the two issues invoked by Warnke in her argument may be found in Arthur Danto's philosophy of art. In fact, Danto's approach to art involves a view of the artist's embeddedness similar to the one Warnke draws from Gadamer's hermeneutic tenets. This view may be seen to receive a felicitous expression in the Wölfflinian slogan "not everything is possible at every time," which often appears in Danto's work, and which is elaborated in the account of the art world his philosophy of art contains.<sup>258</sup>

For Danto, art is essentially historical in the sense that it is possible to regard certain kinds of objects as artworks only at particular times. It required a specific development in the theoretical atmosphere of the artworld before it became possible to see, for example, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* as a work of art. While highly unlikely, a visually indiscernible object with Warhol's work could have existed in 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence, but, in Danto's account, it could not have been a work of art, for the history of art had by that time not developed to a point which would have allowed an object like the *Brillo Box* to be constituted as an artwork.

Danto's discussion of an era in the history of art he calls "posthistorical art" serves as a good example of the nature of the conditional factors Danto thinks are at play in the artist's work.<sup>259</sup> In Danto's view, a characteristic feature of contemporary art, or "art after the end of art," is that it is marked by an unparallel plurality in the sense that there are no perceptual criteria on what an artwork must look like. As Danto himself notes, this observation would, at

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid. (79-80).

<sup>258</sup> Danto (1981, 44, 113).

<sup>259</sup> Danto (1986, 111).

first glance, seem to undermine the scope of Wölfflin's claim, for in an art world where plurality reigns there no longer seems to be the kinds of limits for art making implied by that claim. However, this, in fact, is not so, for while everything is, indeed, possible in the sense that there are no perceptual constraints on what an artwork may look like, there, nevertheless, remains a specific sense in which not everything is possible. The decisive factor which the artist does not have power over is the way in which his relationship to past history of art is formed. That still remains constituted by the artist's contemporary condition, the artist, thus, ultimately being unable to escape the conditional factors that Wölfflin's claim "not everything is possible at every time" attributes to his activity. That is, even in a contemporary art world marked by an unparallel plurality, specific boundaries remain in place which the artist cannot transgress.

Danto finds the art of Russell Connor an especially rewarding example for illuminating what sorts of constraints are at work in the contemporary artist's activity. The reason for this is that Connor is an artist who often recycles art historical material in his works. For example, his work *The Kidnapping of Modern Art by the New Yorkers* (1985) unites two famous paintings of the history of art, Rubens' the *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* and Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, Connor's painting depicting a scene where the riding savages of the former abduct the female figures depicted in the latter. In this respect, Connor's paintings make use of past art historical material, Connor's way of making art, thus, speaking against precisely the kind of conception of art implied by Wölfflin's claim.<sup>260</sup>

To illuminate how everything is not possible even for artists such as Connor, Danto relies on a distinction commonly made in philosophy of language between the use and mention of a word. When uttering the sentence "Gadamer was Heidegger's pupil," I *use* the proper name "Gadamer," but when I say "Gadamer" consists of seven letters, I am not using that proper name, but *mentioning* it. The insight that Danto draws from this distinction is that while it is nowadays possible to incorporate past art historical material of any kind in one's work, that material cannot be used in a sense similar to the use they were put in the contexts where they originally appeared. That is to say, when Connor incorporates the female figures of *Les demoiselles*, which some have regarded as the first cubist painting, into his work, he is not using the style Picasso used, but mentioning that style. As a consequence, the appearance of cubist style has a different meaning in the respective contexts and contributes differently to the aesthetic character of the paintings in which it appears.

Now, this example points out how even the contemporary artist remains subject to Wölfflin's claim that not everything is possible at every time, or, as Danto puts it, even in a posthistorical era of art, the artist cannot escape "the modalities of history." Even though an artist may, indeed, incorporate any art historical style he wishes within his work, the character of his relationship to the art historical factor he decides to make use of is dependent on his

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<sup>260</sup> Danto (1997, 197-198).

contemporary condition. In other words, it is no longer possible to use past art historical styles as they were in the past, but they are ours to mention only, and consequently they have a different position in contemporary paintings than in the works in which they originally appeared.<sup>261</sup>

This exposition of Danto's account of the art world reveals that he shares with Warnke a similar picture of the factors which condition the artist's activity. On both accounts, art is essentially historical in the sense that the tradition of art forms boundaries for the artist beyond which he can never completely go. Connor can only mention the style that Picasso and Braque developed, but never use it in his paintings in an identical sense with the way it was employed by these two great predecessors of his.

That it is possible to draw a similar view regarding the finiteness and historical nature of the artist's existence from Danto's and Gadamer's ideas may be regarded as a paradoxical result, given the brief, sarcastic comments Danto has made about hermeneutics in some parts of his work. For example, while discussing the notion of deep interpretation – a view of interpretation that he loathes and that Danto thinks shares some essential features with hermeneutic accounts – Danto formulates his critical goals by saying that “I wish to show how easy it is to avoid the dread Hermeneutic Circle, namely by refusing to step into it....”<sup>262</sup>

Now, even though this remark is admittedly overhasty and fails to do justice to the complexities involved, it, nevertheless, may be used to reveal an insufficiency in the argument Warnke offers in support of Gadamer. This is the fact that while Danto's account of the art world implies a view of the artist's condition similar to the one involved in Warnke's argument, Danto by no means shares the view of interpretation and understanding that hermeneutics supports and for which Warnke believes her argument offers support. In fact, Danto's approach to art's historical nature turns the issue upside down. This is because for Danto, the fact that art is historical in the way his philosophy of art describes serves as one of the key reasons for him to reject the kinds of views on interpretation that, for example, a large part of hermeneutics is committed to. As Danto puts this idea “we have the artist's limits as special constraints when interpreting works of art.”<sup>263</sup> That interpretations have these constraints follows directly from the Wölfflinian claim that not everything is possible at every time. That is, there are historical constraints on what meanings works of art may embody and, as a consequence, for interpretations that seek to track what those meanings are.<sup>264</sup>

Now, this discussion of Danto's account of the constraints at play in the artist's work and the implications that this kind of view has for the foundations of interpretation may be used to call into question the argument offered by Warnke. This is because Danto's views imply that there isn't the kind of relationship between the two issues Warnke relies on in her argument.

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid. (205-209).

<sup>262</sup> Danto (1986, 60).

<sup>263</sup> Danto (1981, 130).

<sup>264</sup> Danto (1986, 45-46).

Danto's views, in other words, show that one can see the artist's work as being constrained by various historical factors, without holding the view that the interpreter's horizon is similarly conditioned. Warnke defends the Gadamerian position on understanding by drawing attention to the conditional factors entering into the artist's activity and by claiming that if one finds that account convincing, one should also hold the view that our understanding is conditioned in a similar way. This is precisely the connection that Danto's philosophy of art calls into question, and it is ultimately the reason for the failure of Warnke's defense of the view of understanding Gadamer's hermeneutics involves.

The argument against Gadamer presented in this section shows a structural similarity with the argument presented in the previous section. That is, in both cases, the effect of history is in no way denied, but it is argued that acknowledging its effect on certain factors does not mean that our understanding and interpretation is conditioned by history in a way similar to the way these activities and phenomena are. Both of these conclusions I think call for further analysis of the kinds of factors the effect of tradition and history do, ultimately, extend and whether understanding should be considered to be among them.

### *Effective History, Tradition, and Interpretive Disagreements*

Although it must be pretty clear by now what Gadamer means by his claim that understanding is conditioned by history and tradition, as well as what consequences he and his followers think this view has for methodological hermeneutics and the question regarding the objectivity of the human sciences as a whole, let me begin this section with a few quotations which summarize Gadamer's points so that we do not lose sight of the fundamental tenet of Gadamer's hermeneutics. As we can see, Gadamer's views are not construed that differently today than they were 40 years ago, these quotations, therefore, in a way themselves indicate that history does not condition our understanding in the way Gadamer assumes. Or perhaps the similarity between these readings is due to the fact that people do not change. However, both conclusions would, in fact, undermine Gadamer's account. Be that as it may, in 1969, Richard Palmer summarized Gadamer's views as follows:

There is no pure seeing and understanding of history without reference to the present. On the contrary, history is seen and understood *only* and *always* through consciousness standing in the present... The present is seen and understood *only* through the intentions, ways of seeing, and preoccupations bequeathed from the past... [the past being] a stream in which *we* move and participate, in *every* act of understanding. Tradition, then, is not over against *us* but something in which *we* stand and through which *we* exist; for the most part it is so transparent a medium that it is invisible to *us*....<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Palmer (1969, 178). My italics.

In 2006, Flemming Lebech, in turn, expresses Gadamer's ideas in the following way:

The meaning of the text, rather is not given once and for all, [but] historically conditioned for *us* within the present. An understanding of the text is and remains *one's own*, its meaning, the meaning that *one finds* in it. As a historical being, one understands the text in the light of *the conditions of the present*, differently from the author, who will have understood it in the light of the conditions of *their* time... Each historical period has its *own* pre-understanding, and presents alternative conditions for understanding which allow the text to be considered in a new light.<sup>266</sup>

Now, these excerpts embody a fairly traditional way of understanding Gadamer's hermeneutics, as well as its implications. However, as we saw, E.D. Hirsch claims that Gadamer simply inherits this view of the human condition from Heidegger without critically reflecting on the problematic assumptions that it, in his opinion, involves. Here, I shall take my cue from Hirsch's brief remark by drawing attention to a particular phenomenon which I think calls into question the effect history and tradition are thought to pose on understanding in these passages.

The phenomenon I have in mind is a very mundane one. Yet, I believe that it is precisely its comprehensiveness that Gadamer's theory fails to explain and account for. Its insufficiency with regard to this issue implies that history and tradition cannot be held to condition our understanding in the way Gadamer thinks.

The phenomenon I am here referring to is simply the disagreements that exist between historians and art researchers living in the same age and who belong to the same traditions. The reason why this observation may be used to undermine Gadamer's account of understanding is that it questions the idea that each historical period would have "its *own* pre-understanding" which forms the horizon within which past historical events and artworks are understood in "*their* time" (Lebech). How can this be regarded as an accurate description of the structure of our understanding if there are lively disputes and disagreements between people living in the same age over how a particular historical phenomenon or artwork should be understood? That is, if Gadamer's account is accurate, how can people understand a given artwork in so many different ways, as some contemporary interpretive disputes for example indicate? In other words, how much disagreement can Gadamer's approach to interpretation and understanding allow before the whole idea that our understanding is historically conditioned, which serves as its fundamental tenet, is deprived of substantial content?

For example, some recent interpretations of Wagner's *Ring* show that interpretations that are almost contradictory with one another are truly presented by persons living at the same

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<sup>266</sup> Lebech (2006, 228-229) My italics.

age with a similar cultural and historical background.<sup>267</sup> If these sorts of disagreements do indeed occur, how can this fact be accounted for by appealing to a tradition that, in this case, may be said to be shared by those who have offered the respective interpretations of *The Ring*? And moreover, how can their respective interpretations differ so much from one another if the interpreters share a common tradition, and if that tradition is supposed to have as fundamental an effect on their understanding as Gadamer claims?

The problem that Gadamer's theory ultimately faces once the presence of these sorts of disagreements is observed, is that the more widely they are acknowledged to prevail, the less content there seems to be left in the idea that understanding always happens "in the light of the conditions of the *present*," as Lebech summarizes the fundamental tenet of Gadamer's hermeneutics. How can there be "conditions of the present" that form the shared horizon for a group of interpreters in which their "thought is tied to its finite determinacy,"<sup>268</sup> if at a given time there can be interpretations of *The Ring*, for example, that embody wholly different understandings of the piece? What can the effect of these conditions amount to if these kinds of cases are possible?

This argument may merely give rise to shrugs from Gadamer's followers, since its force pales when compared to the position that Gadamer's hermeneutics elevates tradition to and the ambitious defense of the role of tradition against the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice itself" it involves.<sup>269</sup> However, I am not alone in my claim here, for E.D. Hirsch has presented similar critical remarks to Gadamer. Hirsch hits Gadamer where it must hurt him most. While observing the important position that the concept of tradition occupies in Gadamer's thinking and how strongly Gadamer's theory has become associated with it, in Hirsch's opinion, the account of tradition Gadamer's hermeneutics involves is, nevertheless, "vaguely adumbrated and weakly defended" in *Truth and Method* and that it is questionable whether it can ultimately survive "close empirical and historical examination."<sup>270</sup> In support of his claim Hirsch refers to Edward Shils' book *Tradition* and argues that the account of tradition presented there is in many ways incompatible with Gadamer's approach and, moreover, is much more accurate. What Shils' approach to tradition, in Hirsch's opinion, indicates is that it should not be construed as such "a monolithic" entity as the role given to it by Gadamer.

However, the ultimate problem that Hirsch thinks Gadamer's approach to tradition involves is precisely that it is hard to reconcile with the fact that "members of the same tradition... disagree so persistently about textual meaning."<sup>271</sup> This is precisely the point I made above; the interpretations of *The Ring*, which diverge from each other severely on some

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<sup>267</sup> Here I am referring to the disagreement apparent in Roger Scruton's and Philip Kitcher's and Richard Schacht's interpretations of *The Ring* which I considered in chapter one.

<sup>268</sup> *TM* 301; *WM*, 286.

<sup>269</sup> *TM*, 273; *WM*, 255.

<sup>270</sup> Hirsch (1984, 213).

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.* (214).

points, are formulated by people who arguably belong to the same tradition. How can this observation be accounted for by a conception of tradition that construes its effect on the interpreter's horizon in as fundamental a way as Gadamer's hermeneutics does?

Now, if disagreement between interpreters indeed is as widespread a phenomenon as is assumed above, and this seems to me hard to deny, then it follows that tradition can no longer be considered to hold such a position in the formation of understanding as is assumed by Gadamer. Too much emphasis on the conditional effect of tradition renders the theory incapable of explaining how people belonging to the same tradition are able to produce interpretations of, say, *The Ring* that might even be contradictory. If this possibility is accepted, does any substantial content really remain in the idea that our understanding is conditioned by history and tradition in the way Gadamer describes? How can it be possible for incompatible interpretations to appear if Gadamer's account accurately depicts the process through which our understanding is formed? It seems that the more disagreement one allows within one's approach to interpretation, the less one is able to incorporate the kinds of factors that are important for Gadamer's hermeneutics within one's approach. This includes, for example, such claims as "as a historical being, one understands the text in the light of *the conditions of the present*" (Lebech). Since interpretations of *The Ring* which are almost incompatible with each other currently exist, I cannot see what content there can any longer be in the idea that our understanding is structured by "the conditions of the present," and the less content there is to this idea, the less tradition can be held to condition our understanding.

To be sure, the hermeneutist need not remain unarmed in the face of this criticism, for he could reply that such criticism is plagued by problems similar to those Hirsch's criticism of Gadamer involves. In other words, it is not fair to criticize Gadamer for factors arising from the phenomenon of disagreement, for that question concerns individual acts of understanding. This kind of criticism thus overlooks precisely how Gadamer's interests lie elsewhere. That is, instead of attempting to provide an account of how to reconcile conflicting interpretation it seeks "to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never a subjective relation to a given object but to the history of its effect...."<sup>272</sup> Noting this aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutics allows it to embrace the phenomenon of disagreement, because it has not been shown that similarity with regard to the kinds of underlying conditional factors it brings to light would rule out the possibility of disagreement on the methodological level.

By drawing attention to this aspect of Gadamer's thinking the defender of the hermeneutic position on understanding and interpretation is able to extend his critical response, for he could yet again point out that not only is the above criticism underlain by a misguided understanding of Gadamer's hermeneutic project, but it also neglects the challenge that the ontological strand of hermeneutics has been presumed to pose for methodological approaches,

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<sup>272</sup> *TM*, xxviii; *WM*, xix.



such as different forms of intentionalism. That is, Gadamer's analysis reveals the way individual acts of understanding are always prestructured, and since the factors involved in their prestructuring do change in the drift of history, understanding remains historically conditioned after all.

What sorts of factors these conditions might include and the sort of effect they have been considered to have on individual acts of understanding can be addressed through Jean Grondin's account of "the hermeneutic as." With this concept Grondin tries to explicate Heidegger's idea that human existence is projective and that understanding is always forestructured, an account that had a profound effect on Gadamer's hermeneutics, and especially concerning the point that there is no presuppositionless understanding which it seeks to emphasize. The notion of "the hermeneutic as" is intended to capture the aspect of human existence that underlying all forms of theoretical knowledge and methodological acts of understanding there is a more fundamental level at work which structures our engagement with the world. While it indeed continually directs our lives and is present in structuring various aspects of our activities, most of the time the effect of this level proceeds unreflectively and usually we are hardly aware of how substantially it, in fact, molds our lives and the encounters which take place in it. That is, the world does not unfold to a human being as it does to a theoretical gaze, but we always encounter the world *as* something, that is, as something prestructured. This level is fundamental in the sense that it conditions our individual acts by determining a certain range of possibilities concerning how a given object may be studied and what sorts of approaches may be adopted to it, as well as the purposes to which it may be further applied. These individual questions are, of course, different with respect to different objects, but, nevertheless, in every case a similar structure is at work; individual acts like these do not function independently or without presuppositions, but they are dependent on how the world has already unfolded around us.

It is precisely this level of understanding whose fundamental character Heidegger tries to disclose, and whose relevance for the human sciences Gadamer's hermeneutics seeks to underline. The structure of this level conditions individual acts of understanding in the sense that, as Gadamer himself puts it, "it determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation...."<sup>273</sup> Interpreters are, in other words, "thrown" into a tradition which always prestructures the field in which individual acts of understanding proceed and, thus, ultimately shape their character.<sup>274</sup>

The shortcoming of methodological forms of hermeneutics is precisely that it neglects the way in which our understanding is prestructured by the kinds of factors Grondin tries to capture with the concept of "the hermeneutic as." Richard Palmer expresses the relevance of these conditional factors for interpretation and understanding by maintaining that:

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<sup>273</sup> *TM*, 300; *WM*, 284.

<sup>274</sup> Grondin (1994, 95, 101).

[T]he ‘understanding’ that serves as the foundation for interpretation is itself already shaping and conditioning interpretation – it is a preliminary interpretation, but one that can make all the difference because it sets the stage for subsequent interpretation. Even when a literary interpreter turns toward a poem and, in effect, says, ‘This is a poem; I shall understand it by doing thus and thus’ – he has already interpreted his task and by extension shaped his seeing of the poem. And he has already, with his method, shaped the meaning of the object. Indeed, method and object cannot be separated: method has already delimited *what* we shall see. It has told us what the object is *as* object.<sup>275</sup>

That is, each horizon discloses a space that determines how understanding proceeds, thus underdetermining what sorts of interpretations may be offered within that horizon. This is precisely the aspect of understanding methodological forms of hermeneutics overlook.

The problem in the reply which tries to accommodate the phenomenon of disagreement through a deeper understanding of Gadamer’s hermeneutic project and the position which “the hermeneutic as” elements occupy in it is that it includes an overemphasized view of the effect of “the hermeneutic as” elements on individual acts of understanding. This shortcoming in the reply is, in fact, revealed by a phenomenon which the reply was supposed to overcome, that is, interpretive disagreements. If the factors raised by Grondin in his explication of Gadamer’s views would truly hold the kind of position that is assumed in the counter-argument, that is, delimiting “what we shall see,” how can interpretive disagreements, nevertheless, occur? Or to put the matter differently, if interpretive disagreements are allowed, it becomes hard to ascertain the effect of “the hermeneutic as” elements on individual acts of understanding. The reply to the criticism arising from the presence of interpretive disagreements essentially consisted of showing how sharing similar conditional factors does not rule out the possibility of disagreement between individual interpreters. It was further argued that the unavoidable presence of these factors in every individual act of understanding showed the way in which they are always prestructured to a certain degree, and how this prestructuring shapes individual acts interpreters make at a certain point in time. That is, in the above reply “the hermeneutic as” elements are shared in the sense that they determine what those belonging to the same tradition and whose understanding proceeds under the same horizon will see.

However, if the effect of the conditional factors Grondin’s explication reveals do not rule out the possibility of interpretive disagreements, how extensive can their conditional force on individual acts be considered? In other words, if they truly conditioned the character individual acts can take in as fundamental way as is assumed in the ontological criticism of methodology, how can interpretive disagreements between people living in the same age, who presumably share a horizon involving similar factors with each other, still occur? The kind of force they are assumed to pose on individual acts for example in Palmer’s account, would

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<sup>275</sup> Palmer (1969, 22-23). *Italics* Palmer.

seem to rule out the possibility for the kinds of discrepancies which current interpretations of Wagner's *Ring*, for example, exemplify. That is, if "the hermeneutic as" elements truly set "the stage for subsequent interpretation" and by doing so delimit "what *we* shall see," thus presumably shaping the character of the individual interpretations offered within that horizon, it is hard to explain the presence of interpretive disagreements. This conclusion, in turn, implies that if the presence of interpretive disagreements is accepted, "the hermeneutic as" elements can no longer be thought to condition our individual acts of understanding in the assumed way. Now, once it is shown that they cannot condition our understanding in the sense of delimiting what we shall see, transformations in "the hermeneutic as" elements can no longer be held to pose the kind of effect on our understanding as presumed in the hermeneutic response outlined above either. This is so for a simple reason. If "the hermeneutic as" elements do not condition the character of our individual acts of understanding in a fundamental manner, arguably *changes* in these conditional factors cannot either.

#### **4. The Return of the Question of Validity**

The three preceding sections have tried to undermine the conception of understanding inherent in Gadamer's hermeneutics from different angles. What the reflections presented in them share is that they together call into question the idea that understanding and interpretation would be as historically conditioned as Gadamer's hermeneutics claims. If those accounts are considered accurate, they indirectly serve as defenses for intentionalist approaches to interpretation, for, as shown above, the claim that our understanding is historically conditioned in the way Gadamer describes forms the core of the hermeneutic criticism of intentionalism.

The approach to Gadamer's views adopted in these criticisms, however, may be considered uncharitable to a certain extent, for they may be argued to give the impression that Gadamer's hermeneutics would render the human subject a mere instrument of tradition, and that the interpreter would have no possibility of rising above those conditional factors which she has inherited from the tradition she belongs to. A more careful reading of Gadamer's hermeneutics indicates that to attribute this sort of view of tradition to Gadamer in some ways misrepresents its ultimate content. This is because while Gadamer does indeed emphasize the role of tradition in the formation of understanding, he by no means maintains that we are inevitably confined within the boundaries it sets for us. To be sure, for Gadamer, understanding always involves prejudgments (*Vorurteil*). However, this does not mean that we could not overcome or replace those prejudgments that structure our understanding at a given time, or that it would not be possible to discriminate between better and worse ones. In fact, the question of how to discriminate those prejudgments "by which we *understand*, from

the *false* ones, by which we *misunderstand*<sup>276</sup> becomes one of the most important issues for Gadamer's hermeneutics.

The question regarding the position of prejudgments in understanding is also connected to the issue of relativism, for that may be construed as the problem of how it is possible to discriminate between more and less valid prejudgments. Georgia Warnke formulates the problem of discriminating between more and less valid prejudgments which the hermeneutist must ultimately face as the problem of subjectivism. Since it is admitted that certain prejudgments only distort the object of understanding, there must be some sort of foundation for evaluating certain kinds of prejudgments as being of such a kind. Moreover, Gadamer must formulate an account of how they can be distinguished from those which allow us to understand truthfully, and that do not rise from mere personal preferences and idiosyncrasies, but have a claim to more general validity. Or as Warnke succinctly puts the problem at issue here: "In short, can hermeneutics distinguish between distortion and situated interpretation or must it ultimately sanction the subjectivism to which the emphasis on 'situatedness' seems to lead?"<sup>277</sup>

Now, drawing attention to the fact that Gadamer acknowledges that we can rise above the prejudgments tradition has equipped us with and that the problem of separating true prejudgments from false ones is a pressing one for his hermeneutics is not really interesting because it can be argued to reveal certain insufficiencies in the reading of Gadamer's theory the above criticism was underlain by. What is more interesting is another consequence that may be drawn from it. What Gadamer's readiness to take the problem of subjectivism seriously implies is that his hermeneutics must, after all, give attention to the issue of validity in interpretation. Now, the reason why this is an intriguing conclusion is that it calls for a re-evaluation of the relationship that Hirsch's critics have seen to hold between Gadamer's and Hirsch's views. That is, if "it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the *legitimacy* – i.e., the origin and *validity* – of the fore-meanings dwelling in him,"<sup>278</sup> as Gadamer insists, then I cannot see how it could any longer be claimed that the concerns of Hirsch's and Gadamer's respective accounts of interpretation are as remote from each other as some contemporary hermeneutists have assumed.

That the problem of validity in understanding has a position in Gadamer's hermeneutics is also indicated by the fact that his work does contain investigations of how true prejudgments may be separated from false ones. Here, I shall take up two replies to the problem of the validity of prejudgments that may be found in Gadamer's work. First, Gadamer insists that assessing the validity of those prejudgments with which the interpreter approaches a text at a certain time requires that the interpreter takes a specific attitude towards the work under

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<sup>276</sup> *TM*, 298; *WM*, 282. My italics.

<sup>277</sup> Warnke (1987, 72).

<sup>278</sup> *TM*, 270; *WM*, 252. My italics.

scrutiny. According to him, the interpreter should “foreground” his prejudices so that the work under interpretation receives a normative authority over the interpreter, and has thus a possibility of making a claim to him.<sup>279</sup> In other words, “for Gadamer... it is essential to grant the text one is studying a certain normative authority, for it is only by doing so that one can test the adequacy of one’s view about either the text or the issues on which it focuses.”<sup>280</sup>

Now, it is of course very desirable that the interpreter takes the kind of attitude towards the object under interpretation that Gadamer describes as a form of foregrounding. Yet, I cannot see how on the basis of adopting this attitude alone the sort of foundation can be established which the discrimination between different prejudgments requires. Its inability to serve such a function becomes all the more likely if one agrees with Arthur Danto, and with a host of other philosophers for that matter, that two indiscernible texts, may, nevertheless, have very different properties. One of the most famous cases which have led philosophers of art to hold this kind of view of work constitution is the case described by Jorge Louis Borges in his *Pierre Menard. Symbolist Poet*.<sup>281</sup> That story depicts a case where some parts of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* are reproduced in another literary work, i.e., in the one composed by Menard in the story. The moral which philosophers such as Danto have drawn from this case is that the nature of a literary work of art is ultimately constituted by other factors than its discernible properties. That is, despite their indiscernibility Menard’s *Don Quixote* is reported to be “infinitely more subtle than that of Cervantes,” and while Cervantes “opposes to the fiction of chivalry the tawdry provincial reality of his country,” this is far from the concerns that occupy Menard in his work.<sup>282</sup>

The case of Pierre Menard calls into question the kind of position which the text acquires in Gadamer’s attempt to separate false prejudgments from true ones. In other words, if the respective works of Menard and Cervantes truly have different properties, while being identical on a textual level, why should any kind of normative authority be given to the text when critically examining the validity of one’s prejudgments with which one approaches the respective works? To be sure, it might well be so that “hermeneutically schooled consciousness must be sensitive to the otherness of the text from the beginning” and we may even applaud the hermeneutist for insisting on the importance of this sort of attitude. However, if this maxim is intended to provide a firm enough ground to solve the problem of subjectivism as it is formulated by Warnke, then it can hardly be regarded as a proper solution to that problem.

Another factor that Gadamer thinks may be relied on in the attempt to distinguish true prejudgments from false ones is temporal distance. That is, in his opinion, in the course of time not only do “local and limited prejudices die away, but [it] allows those that bring about

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<sup>279</sup> *TM*, 298; *WM*, 282.

<sup>280</sup> Warnke (1987, 87).

<sup>281</sup> Danto (1981, ch. 2).

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.* (35).

genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such.”<sup>283</sup> Jean Grondin points out that Gadamer’s views on this issue slightly changed during his career. While in the first edition of *Truth and Method* Gadamer writes that “it is only temporal distance that can solve” this question, in the fifth edition, Gadamer, in turn, maintains that temporal distance is “often” the factor that serves this function. Grondin continues that “Gadamer’s revision nicely illustrates a distinctive characteristic of hermeneutics, namely, that it remains continually ready to alter its opinion when better insight comes along.”<sup>284</sup>

Now, first of all this sort of flaunting with openmindedness is just silly, for if a willingness to revise one’s views in the face of criticism is considered the mark of a philosopher who has absorbed the hermeneutic spirit, then Bertrand Russell should be counted as an exemplary figure of what it means to be a hermeneutist. Second, and of course more importantly, I just cannot see how reliance on temporal distance alone can give the kind of normative bite to Gadamer’s theory that it, ultimately, is in need of. To be sure, in many cases temporal distance does lead to the dying away of “local and limited” prejudgments. This development, however, does not merely occur because time flies by, but in many cases, a lot of work needs to be done so that false prejudgments may be identified, and for uncovering the reasons for judging them to be distortive of understanding.

It seems that no other artist has encountered such widespread and deep rooted prejudgments and prejudices as Richard Wagner. In his book, *Wagner and Philosophy* Bryan Magee draws attention to their origin, as well as points out the effect these prejudices have, in his opinion, had on the way people approach Wagner’s works. Here is his assessment of the situation:

I sometimes think there are two Wagners in our culture, almost unrecognizably different from one another: the Wagner possessed by those who know his work, and the Wagner imagined by those who know him only by name and reputation. [People of the latter kind] create misunderstanding not only of their fellows but, more importantly, of Wagner and his works. I have innumerable times heard well-meaning people say in minatory tones such things as ‘After all, one can’t ignore the ideas behind these works’, as if the ideas were quite different from what they are. Such people seem to think they know that the ideas are of a dictatorial and chauvinistic nature.<sup>285</sup>

Magee thinks that this sort of attitude towards Wagner’s works has its origins in the political developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, “the most serious damage ever done to Wagner’s image, the factor that has distorted and deformed it more than any other, is his posthumous

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<sup>283</sup> *TM* 298; *WM*, 282.

<sup>284</sup> Grondin (1994, 113).

<sup>285</sup> Magee (2001, 73-75).

relationship with Adolf Hitler.”<sup>286</sup> The firmness of this association in people’s minds has had the result that:

Many people nowadays write and talk as if Wagner provided a sort of sound-track to the Third Reich, and that the history of the Nazis took place to a musical accompaniment composed by Wagner; and that on organized party occasions there was always, or usually, Wagner. This conception has become a cliché on film and television, where it is usual for any depiction of the Nazis to be literally accompanied by Wagner’s music, for preference at its most brassy and bombastic, as in the Ride of the Valkyries or Prelude of Act III of *Lohengrin*, and played very loud.<sup>287</sup>

Now, here we have a perfect case which illustrates the kinds of factors through which prejudgments emerge and the kind of effect they may, ultimately, have on one’s reception of a work of art. By being so prejudicially loaded, the case of Wagner also serves as a good example by which to consider the question of how certain prejudgments can be considered invalid. As the above quotations already suggest, Magee finds these widespread prejudices about Wagner and his works distortive, or as Gadamer might put it, false. For Magee the claim that, for example, Wagner’s *Ring* would give “expression to an overweening and bombastic German nationalism” is “from start to finish, poppycock.”<sup>288</sup>

Since at least to me it seems that Wagner’s works are nowadays less frequently associated with anti-Semitism than before, the case indeed appears to be as Gadamer claims it to be, that is, that temporal distance allows “local and limited prejudices [to] die away.” However, as already suggested, that certain deep-rooted prejudices ultimately die away does not happen merely because of the passage of time, but often this involves such factors as the appearance of new evidence, presenting detailed arguments that call the prejudices into question, as well as weighing the comparative strength of different pieces of evidence. For example, the anti-Semitic interpretations of Wagner’s works have been opposed by noting the fact that while Wagner spent so much ink on explaining his works in writing, he nowhere hints that his music dramas would involve anti-Semitic undercurrents or that certain characters, such as Mime and Alberich in *The Ring*, would have been intended as caricatures of the Jewish people. Yet, if it indeed is so that these sorts of factors form an essential part of the activity through which we become aware of those prejudices which merely distort our possibility to understand, then it seems that a mere reliance on temporal distance does not manage to provide what is needed. A more rigorous account of the grounds of validity is, instead, called for.

Now, if Gadamer’s theory has troubles of providing an appropriate account of how false prejudgments which only distort understanding may be discriminated from true ones, it indeed is in danger of slipping the slope to a form of relativism, as Joseph Margolis has, in

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid. (78).

<sup>287</sup> Ibid. (365).

<sup>288</sup> Ibid. (74).

fact, also suggested.<sup>289</sup> However, Warnke proposes a third option with the help of which it is possible for Gadamer to overcome the problem of subjectivism. In her opinion, Gadamer could, yet again, appeal to the fact that understanding necessarily proceeds as a part of a tradition, tradition thus having a claim to a specific kind of normative authority over the individual interpreter. According to Warnke, this maneuver allows Gadamer to meet the challenge arising from the problem of subjectivism, for in this case Gadamer could maintain that “an adequate understanding of an object is rather a question of appropriating a tradition of interpretation as a general normative framework and the tradition is thus supposed to provide some kind of normative limit to the free range of interpretation.”<sup>290</sup>

While this kind of appeal to tradition does indeed seem like a reasonable option for Gadamer to take to overcome the problem of subjectivism, ultimately it does not work. We saw that even Gadamer must accept the presence of interpretive disagreements between people whom his theory counts as belonging to the same tradition. Now, if this possibility is accepted, then tradition can hardly exhibit the kind of uniformity of views and approaches to pose a firm enough “normative limit to the free range of interpretation.” That is, if a tradition can give rise to interpretations which are significantly different from one another, as was indicated above, how can that kind of tradition be appealed to when considering which interpretations are more valid than others? It seems that only a highly monolithic view of tradition could provide the kind of normative force Gadamer is in need of in this context. However, as Hirsch points out, this view can hardly survive closer examination, and thus normativity cannot be founded upon such a view of tradition.

Moreover, the claim that tradition poses a limit on interpretations seems to reformulate the role of tradition within Gadamer’s hermeneutics in a way that the character of Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a whole undergoes a transformation. As noted above, Gadamer replies to Emilio Betti that their concerns are different in the respect that he is not interested in the grounds for justification, but to “describe *what is*,” that is, to give a phenomenological account of understanding which reveals the way in which it is always affected by tradition and history. However, if tradition is meant to create boundaries on the sorts of interpretations that may be considered valid, as Warnke suggests, does not this mean that Gadamer after all ascribes a normative role to that notion. If that indeed is the case, doesn’t this imply that Gadamer’s hermeneutics no longer involves a description of the way tradition *does* participate in the formation of our understanding, but, instead, how it *should* participate in it.

Now, the interesting point is not really that the appeal to tradition cannot provide the kind of foundation for discriminating true prejudgments from distortive ones Gadamer is in need of, but that the role ascribed to tradition by Warnke in the reply she offers lends further support to the claim that normative questions related to the grounds of validity do indeed have a position in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. This being so, it is hard to see how Gadamer is any

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<sup>289</sup> Margolis (1995b, ch. 2).

<sup>290</sup> Warnke (1987, 99).



longer able to hold on to the description of his theory according to which his “real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting.”<sup>291</sup> Rather, it seems to be the case that the concerns of Gadamer’s and Hirsch’s approaches to interpretation and understanding overlap much more significantly with each other than some contemporary hermeneutists have assumed.

Yet, the most pressing problem that Gadamer now faces is that the answers he gives to the problem of validity, i.e., the problem of subjectivism, are not that successful, and neither does Warnke’s proposition formulated in Gadamer’s footsteps seem to fare much better. That is, while acknowledging that our understanding may be guided by false prejudices and by insisting on the need to dissociate them from those prejudgments which allow us to understand truthfully, Gadamer’s hermeneutics is, nevertheless, unable to provide the sort of normativity required by these tasks. Neither the insistence on the normative authority of the text nor the role that is attributed to temporal distance by Gadamer manage to provide what is required, that is, a foundation for discriminating between more and less truthful prejudgments. That is to say, Gadamer must, after all, take some sort of stand on the issue of validity of interpretation, but the answers found in his work are far from satisfactory. Both claims may, in fact, yet again, be found in Hirsch’s criticism.<sup>292</sup>

### *Overcoming Bizarre Metaphors: Donald Davidson and Hermeneutic Criticisms of Intentionalism*

Given that formulating an adequate response to the problem of validity in interpretation motivates intentionalist approaches to interpretation, as is indicated, for example, by Hirsch’s literary theory, the above account of Gadamer’s hermeneutics gives strong grounds for giving a new hearing to intentionalist approaches. The revival of intentionalist theories within hermeneutics, however, still faces one severe obstacle. They have not only been rejected because of their neglect of the historical nature of understanding, but also because they have thought to presuppose views of human subjectivity which after the decay of Romanticism can no longer be held. That is, some remarks found in hermeneutic literature suggest that contemporary hermeneutists still strongly associate an intentionalist approach with accounts of hermeneutics formulated by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and with the view of human subjectivity they have been assumed to be underlain by, a view that Gadamer calls a form of “pantheistic metaphysics of individuality.”<sup>293</sup> Moreover, the view of successful interpretation they involve has been assumed to require from the interpreter undertakings which are

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<sup>291</sup> *TM*, xxv-xxvi; *WM*, xvi.

<sup>292</sup> Hirsch (1967, 252-254).

<sup>293</sup> *TM*, 196; *WM*, 186.

impossible to carry out. Some descriptions used in connection with these critiques indicate what they have been assumed to be like. For example, Gadamer himself claims that Schleiermacher's account of the "divinatory act," which lies at the heart of his methodological approach to understanding and which has been considered a forefather of intentionalism, requires that "one places oneself entirely within the writer's mind..." and that the romantic movement as a whole involves "the naïve assumption... that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age..."<sup>294</sup> Richard Palmer, in turn, claims that in the divinatory method, "one transforms oneself into the other person in order to grasp his individuality directly" and that in "this moment of interpretation, one goes out of himself and transforms himself into the author so that he can grasp in full immediacy, the latter's mental process."<sup>295</sup>

Now, if intentionalist theories of interpretation are truly thought to involve a view of the procedures required in successful interpretation similar to those receiving descriptions in these quotations, no wonder intentionalism has had a hard time in gaining support within recent hermeneutic theory. Taking up these assumptions reveals that contemporary criticisms of intentionalism within hermeneutics have been heavily prejudiced in the sense that the bar for their success has been raised to a disproportionate level. This may be seen from the fact that it is hard even to begin to make sense of what these procedures ultimately might consist of and when they would have been successfully carried out.

Here is where Donald Davidson's ideas prove relevant, for they provide an opportunity for formulating an intentionalist theory of interpretation which manages to overcome the hermeneutic criticisms of that view stemming from the above kind assumptions. To introduce Davidson's views in the context of hermeneutics is nothing new, of course. On the contrary, there is a growing literature where different parts of Davidson's work, such as the rationality assumptions contained in the principle of charity, the dialogic character of understanding, and the holistic account of the mind, are considered in relation to Gadamer's views on similar topics, and in many cases they are seen to bear striking similarities with one another.

Although Davidson's views have already raised interest within hermeneutics, there, nevertheless, is a particular daringness involved in the attempt to set the approach to understanding and interpretation they involve alongside hermeneutic accounts. This is because even in those readings where Davidson's and Gadamer's philosophies have been seen to share various elements, Gadamer and hermeneutics at large have nevertheless been considered to ultimately come out ahead; they are able to provide a deeper picture of the complexities involved in understanding and interpretation than Davidson.<sup>296</sup> For example, Jeff Malpas claims that "only by adopting a more hermeneutical approach... can the Davidsonian

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<sup>294</sup> *TM*, 296-297; *WM*, 280-281.

<sup>295</sup> Palmer (1969, 90).

<sup>296</sup> One notable exception which provides a different assessment of the relationship between Davidson's thinking and hermeneutics is Child (2006).

project be properly developed and its full implications realized,”<sup>297</sup> the need for this sort of expansion following for example from the fact that while “the basic idea that interpretation and understanding is a matter of unification between differing ‘horizons’” seems to be common to both Gadamer and Davidson, this kind of approach appears “in a less explicit and developed way” in the latter.<sup>298</sup>

Now, the view of the relationship between Davidson and Gadamer offered by Malpas is challenging for my concerns not only because it sides with Gadamer, but because in Malpas’ opinion the standpoint on these issues, which appears in an undeveloped form in Davidson’s writings, and whose full implications may be uncovered by giving them a hermeneutic twist, is incompatible with the approach to interpretation and understanding this study tries to develop on the basis of Davidson’s views. In fact, by saying that “the Davidsonian position cannot allow that the speaker’s intentions have any privileged role to play in constituting meaning,”<sup>299</sup> Malpas’ reading is totally at odds with the one developed by me, and if accurate, would severely undermine my approach. Now, just as one thinks that Malpas’ approach to the issue regarding the relationship between Davidson and Gadamer could not be more challenging, he makes an observation which is in danger of calling into question the very idea of this chapter. Since Malpas believes that Davidson’s holism embodies a skeptical attitude towards the position of intentions in interpretation and understanding similar to the one found in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, he believes that Davidson’s ideas may be used in supplementing the hermeneutic attempt to throw a wrench in the works of Hirsch’s literary theory.<sup>300</sup>

The relationship that Malpas draws between Davidson’s and Gadamer’s views, as well as the implications he draws from Davidson’s holism for interpretation are, however, by no means unproblematic. First, the claim that Davidson could not construe a close relationship between intention and meaning is already problematic on a textual level, for in many places Davidson does build such a relationship between the two. Davidson, for example, at one point observes that “the Gricean element in my formulation is the dependence of meaning on intention.”<sup>301</sup> Moreover, in the few texts in which Davidson deals with the problem of literary interpretation explicitly, he supports a view on meaning constitution and the grounds of validity similar to the one Hirsch supports.

Yet, the problem of using this statement as counterevidence for Malpas’ interpretation might be considered uncharitable, for this statement by Davidson appears in an article which was published in 1994, that is, two years after Malpas’ book on Davidson *The Mirror of Meaning* appeared. Nevertheless, I do not believe that one must take recourse to hindsight to reveal problems in Malpas’ account. This is because at the end of the 1980s articles appeared

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<sup>297</sup> Malpas (1992, 46).

<sup>298</sup> Ibid. (98).

<sup>299</sup> Ibid. (68).

<sup>300</sup> Ibid. (68n38).

<sup>301</sup> Davidson (2005/1994, 121).

where Davidson expresses an intentionalist attitude towards meaning.<sup>302</sup> To be sure, Malpas does refer to the 1986 article “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” which has sometimes been considered to mark the beginning of Davidson’s later philosophy of language. In this article, the speaker’s intentions acquire a role in explaining meaning that they did not previously occupy in Davidson’s earlier writings. This is an observation that Malpas makes as well, but he nevertheless thinks that intentions cannot play such “a foundational role” in Davidson’s views, as they do in Paul Grice’s account, for example.<sup>303</sup>

Now, the ultimate assessment of Malpas’ interpretation of Davidson depends on how one understands the notions of “foundational role” and “privileged role.” As we saw in the previous chapter, Davidson wants to avoid falling into the Humpty Dumpty view of meaning, that is, the view that the meaning of an utterance is in every case identical with what the speaker intended by it. So, it is true that in this sense Davidson cannot allow intentions to have a foundational role. However, if certain conditions are met, the utterance does, in Davidson’s account, mean what the speaker intended. In this respect, the Davidsonian position can allow intentions a much more important role in determining meaning than Malpas’ reading implies. For this reason Malpas’ hermeneutic approach to Davidson does not rule out the possibility of constructing an intentionalist theory of interpretation with Davidson’s views as a touchstone.

Another factor which, in Malpas’ opinion, renders the relationship between Davidson’s views and an intentionalist approach to meaning problematic is the holism of the mental underlying various parts of Davidson’s work, for that kind of outlook is, in his opinion, hard to reconcile with the kind of “atomistic” and “reductive” explanations of meaning that, in Malpas’ opinion, characterize intentionalist accounts, such as Grice’s.<sup>304</sup> In Malpas’ description, “on such accounts, meaning would be reduced to a combination of belief and intention, rather than being seen as one element in a more complex holistic structure.”<sup>305</sup>

Now, while this is an accurate assessment of the implications of Davidson’s views, the more general conclusion drawn by Malpas may, nevertheless, be questioned, for he does not consider the possibility that an intentionalist theory of interpretation could, in fact, accommodate this kind of view of the mental. That is, some existing intentionalist approaches to interpretation may not involve the holistic view of the human mind Davidson supports, but this does not imply that such a theory could not be developed.

Support for a view that it is possible to formulate an intentionalist theory of interpretation upon Davidson’s holism is offered by Samuel Wheeler. Like Malpas, Wheeler contrasts Davidson’s approach to interpretation with that of Hirsch. However, he locates the significant difference between their views in a different place than Malpas. In Wheeler’s opinion, the fact

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<sup>302</sup> Davidson (2005/1986); Davidson (2005/1989).

<sup>303</sup> Malpas (1992, 68).

<sup>304</sup> Ibid. (67).

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

that Davidson's approach emphasizes the holistic character of the mental does not mean it could not ascribe the author's intention a position similar to the one it occupies within Hirsch's literary theory. Rather, the decisive factor which for Wheeler serves to separate the approaches from one another is that in them intentions are construed through a different conception of the human mind. Hirsch's intentionalism precisely lacks the sort of holism of the mind which is fundamental for a Davidsonian version of intentionalism. That is to say, "Davidson's theory does not suppose that intentions are made up of some version of 'logoi' that lie behind words." In contrast to this sort of outlook, Davidson's account, instead, maintains that "intentions are ascribed along with beliefs, desires, and meanings of utterances in a holistic way."<sup>306</sup>

Now, according to Malpas' reading of Davidson, it is precisely this kind of holistic outlook on meaning and the mental found in various parts of Davidson's work which connects Davidson's approach to interpretation and understanding with Gadamer's. However, what the account of Davidson's and Hirsch's views offered by Wheeler indicates is that intentionalist approaches to interpretation need not be incongruent with this kind of outlook. In other words, it is true that holism emphasizes the fact that "speakers' intentions cannot be understood independently of the holistic structure of which they are a part,"<sup>307</sup> as Malpas claims. Yet, Malpas does not manage to show why an intentionalist theory could not be built upon this kind of assumption. At least Davidson's own views do not suggest that there would be the sort of incongruence between the two views invoked by Malpas. Now, if there is no such incongruence, it seems that we are in a position to see why the negative stance towards intentionalism a large part of contemporary hermeneutics involves rests on some overhasty conclusions. The connection between holism and intentionalism that Davidson's views give the possibility of drawing implies that an intentionalist approach to interpretation and understanding can be built on a foundation which shares certain fundamental elements with the tradition of hermeneutics. To be sure, what this kind of holistic intentionalism ultimately looks like is still rather unclear. What the connection between an intentionalist theory and a holistic account of interpretation drawn here, however, does already show is that an intentionalist approach does not have to involve the assumption that "the miracle of understanding" is made possible by "the fact that all individuality is pantheistically embraced within the absolute," which Gadamer thinks is implied by the tenets of Schleiermacher and Dilthey.<sup>308</sup> In fact, the structure which is attributed to interpretation in this approach overlaps in significant ways with the hermeneutic circle. However, there are also some crucial differences. More importantly, the differences in question allow the Davidsonian position to provide something Gadamer's hermeneutics was accused of lacking above, that is, a detailed

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<sup>306</sup> Wheeler (2003, 189).

<sup>307</sup> Malpas (1992, 68).

<sup>308</sup> *TM*, 337; *WM*, 324.

and resourceful framework for considering what sorts of prejudgments should not, ultimately, be a part of our understanding.

### *Hypothetico-Deductive Method and the Hermeneutic Circle*

The analysis of the hermeneutic method as the hypothetico-deductive method applied to meaningful material offered by Dagfinn Føllesdal gives some initial indication of how interpretation proceeds in the account of interpretation outlined in terms of Davidson's holism, as well as what sort of foundation it provides for separating true prejudgments from false ones. Like Malpas, Føllesdal draws attention to the similarities between Davidson's views and the assumptions involved in hermeneutic accounts of understanding, Føllesdal ultimately claiming that "philosophers belonging to very different traditions... have much to learn from one another."<sup>309</sup> His assessment of the relationship between Davidson's views and those of hermeneutists is, however, different from the one suggested by Malpas above, for Føllesdal thinks that the more refined analysis of understanding, especially as that question concerns the place of rationality assumptions within it, is to be found in Davidson.<sup>310</sup>

Now, the reason why Føllesdal's analysis is, ultimately, so revealing in this context is that it keeps the idea that interpretation proceeds in a circular manner, that is, as a reconciliation between general hypotheses and individual parts of a work, and always under certain presumptions, here understood as hypotheses, both aspects of that process it is important for Gadamer to emphasize. Simultaneously, however, the view provided by Føllesdal suggests that to hold this sort of view does not imply a consequence which has usually been attributed to it in the hermeneutic literature, that is, that the circular nature of interpretation between part and whole would never achieve a point of termination, interpretation, thus, essentially being a never-ending process. Føllesdal's account of the circular nature of interpretation, in other words, implies a far less mysterious reading of the fact that understanding proceeds in a circular manner than the one present in the hermeneutic literature.<sup>311</sup>

The hermeneutist should not, however, greet this demystification with too much opposition. This is because while indeed depriving the idea of the hermeneutic circle from the kind of depth it has been assumed to possess in hermeneutics, Føllesdal's account of the hermeneutic method as the hypothetico-deductive method applied to meaningful material simultaneously provides the hermeneutist with something he has been argued to be in need of above, that is, a more rigid foundation for assessing validity in interpretation and understanding. In other words, the analysis of the grounds of justification offered by Føllesdal allows the Gadamerian hermeneutist to keep various fundamental elements of his views,

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<sup>309</sup> Føllesdal (1979, 336).

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> See, for example, Palmer (1969, 25).

while simultaneously providing him with something his forefather has failed to provide him with.

Føllesdal insists that one of the reasons why philosophers associated with the hermeneutic tradition, such as Jürgen Habermas, have failed to see the connection between the method they believe the human sciences employ and the hypothetico-method they associate with the natural and experimental sciences is that the conception of the hypothetico-deductive method underlying their views has, in Føllesdal's opinion, been rather vague and ultimately somewhat distortive of what that belief formation system ultimately amounts to.

By the hypothetico-method Føllesdal understands a system in which beliefs are formed as a result of the following operations: consequences are deduced from a set of hypotheses, and the better the deduced consequences may be shown to "fit with our experiences and with our other well-supported beliefs," the more justified we are in believing in those hypotheses the system contains.<sup>312</sup> In other words, a set of beliefs which make up a given hypothetico-deductive system is more justified than a rival one the better the consequences deduced from its hypotheses manage to survive the stream of empirical data, and the better they fit with beliefs and conceptions we have strong reasons for keeping.

Now, Føllesdal thinks that a method with a structure similar to the hypothetico-deductive one is not only used in the case of literary interpretation, but in fact he argues that "the hypothetico-deductive method is used wherever interpretation takes place."<sup>313</sup> That is, a given interpretation has a set of consequences and the validity of the proposed interpretation is assessed in regard to how those consequences fit with a set of data and with other beliefs and theories we at a particular point hold. If the consequences deduced from a given hypothesis cannot, for example, be reconciled with the data offered or if they are incompatible with theories and conceptions we are reluctant to give up, there are good reasons for abandoning the proposed interpretation altogether.<sup>314</sup>

As an example to elucidate how the hypothetico-deductive method ultimately works in the case of literary interpretation Føllesdal introduces five different interpretations concerning the character of the Stranger in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. I shall not present a deep examination of the details these interpretations involve, but just use them as an illumination of how the hypothetico-deductive method is, in Føllesdal's view, employed in the case of interpretation, and to indicate the structural similarities it shares with the hermeneutic circle. The oldest interpretation of this character has been that the stranger "represents anxiety." This interpretation has been supported by two pieces of evidence in particular, the first one referring to the fact that "the stranger invariably appears in situations where Peer is anxious," while the other points out the influence that Søren Kierkegaard, that is, "the philosopher of

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<sup>312</sup> Føllesdal (1979, 321).

<sup>313</sup> Ibid. (328).

<sup>314</sup> Ibid. (324).

anxiety,” had on Ibsen.<sup>315</sup> Føllesdal thinks that while apparently reasonable, this interpretation of the stranger may be objected to on the grounds that it is, ultimately, a rather weak explanation in the sense that the interpretation “accounts for very little of what is said about the stranger in the play, and that there are other interpretations that do better than this one.”<sup>316</sup>

The third interpretation of the stranger considered by Føllesdal is one offered by Martin Svendsen in 1922, which involves a hypothesis that the stranger is Ibsen himself. Svendsen lists eight considerations which, in his opinion, speak in favor of the interpretation he proposes, ranging from the claim that while the stranger has a craving to become Peer’s moral guide, Ibsen had a similar desire with regard to the Norwegian people, to the observation that the stranger and Ibsen have similar attitudes towards certain issues, such as the relationship between time and change.<sup>317</sup>

I think there is no need to go into more detail, for these examples already point to those factors of the hypothetico-deductive method which for Føllesdal explains its similarity with the hermeneutic circle. In this model, interpretation involves a hypothesis, for example that the stranger is Ibsen, from which a set of consequences is deduced, which spells out what should be the case for the hypothesis to be believable. The hypothesis is then weighed against individual parts of the work, the hypothesis becoming more justified as the set of data which fit with the consequences grows larger. For example, the fact that the stranger possesses views similar to those Ibsen holds is in this case meant to lend support to the hypothesis that the stranger is Ibsen, for the fact that they should hold similar views on certain topics is a consequence which may be deduced from the original hypothesis. This being so, it would to a certain degree undermine the hypothesis that the stranger is Ibsen if their beliefs would not overlap.

In addition to how the consequences deduced from the hypothesis fit with certain pieces of evidence, the strength of the hypothesis is also based on what sort of information, theories, and rules of inference have been relied on in deducing the consequences. That is, do the consequences reasonably follow from the hypothesis? If the theories, beliefs etc. which have been made use of when deducing the consequences from the hypothesis are themselves questionable, the ability of the consequences to fit with certain pieces of evidence no longer speaks in favor of the hypothesis. In other words, it can be asked is the inference from the hypothesis that the stranger is Ibsen to the consequence that the stranger and Ibsen should hold similar views in regard to certain topics for this to be the case a reasonable one? If the answer to this question is negative, the fact that the views of the stranger overlap with those of Ibsen no longer gives support to the view that the stranger is Ibsen.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid. (322-323).

<sup>316</sup> Ibid. (323).

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid. (324).



The fact that the hypothetico-deductive method is used both in the natural sciences and in the humanities does not, however, mean that there would be no differences between these two areas of research. In Føllesdal's view, one distinguishing factor between the two is the way in which the relevant data is constituted. While it is indeed the case that even in the natural sciences observation is theory-laden in the sense that the observations through which the data is collected are influenced by our theories, in Føllesdal's opinion, this is the case with the humanities to a much larger extent. For example, in the case of ethics, our theories influence our ethical intuitions on the basis of which the relevant data is collected, the kind of data considered relevant thus changing as our theories change.<sup>319</sup>

That theories have a stronger effect on data collection in the case of the humanities is precisely the factor which for Føllesdal brings out the similarities between the hypothetico-deductive method and the hermeneutic circle. That is, in a way similar to how our theories have an influence on our ethical intuitions, in the case of literary interpretation the interpretation of individual words and parts of the work is influenced by our interpretation of the whole work and the prejudgments with which we initially set out to interpret the work in question. On the other hand, the way we interpret the individual parts of the work has an effect on the way we begin to see the whole work. In Føllesdal's opinion, this peculiar "back and forth movement" between part and whole characterizes the way inquiry proceeds both in the case of the hypothetico-deductive method and in the hermeneutic circle.<sup>320</sup>

Now, the understanding of the hermeneutic circle apparent in Føllesdal's account corresponds to the way in which the core of that principle is usually formulated in the hermeneutic literature. The similarity between Føllesdal's and Gadamer's approaches to interpretation is that in them interpretation is always considered to proceed under certain hypotheses or, as Gadamer would put it, under certain prejudgments. For Gadamer, these prejudgments form the horizon through which the work under interpretation is constituted, that horizon thus simultaneously determining a field "beyond which one cannot see,"<sup>321</sup> while for Føllesdal, the hypotheses single out from the stream of experience the data which is relevant. The decisive difference between the two approaches to the circular nature of interpretation, however, is that Føllesdal's views imply that the different parts which make up the system of hypotheses and consequences, are not as intertwined with each other as Gadamer's description of the hermeneutic circle assumes. The initial hypotheses do not determine the interpretation process in as fundamental a way as prejudgments are considered to in Gadamer's hermeneutics. There is, in other words, much more room for considering the validity of individual hypotheses, i.e., prejudgments, with which the work under interpretation is initially approached than Gadamer's approach allows. The effect of the initial prejudgments on the interpretation process, as well as on the assessment whether those prejudgments are

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid. (331-332).

<sup>320</sup> Ibid. (332).

<sup>321</sup> Lebech (2006, 222).

valid or not and how they fit with the individual parts of the work, is much less extensive than Gadamer's description of the hermeneutic circle implies.

While Føllesdal's account of the circular nature of interpretation ultimately departs from Gadamer's reading in certain respects, those features in Føllesdal's analysis that serve to distinguish it from the one offered by Gadamer can be seen to supplement Gadamer's theory precisely in the way it was considered to be in need of above. That is, while acknowledging the importance of providing an adequate account of what validity in interpretation amounts to, Gadamer was, nevertheless, shown to fail in providing such an account.

Now, it seems that Føllesdal's account of the hermeneutic method as the hypothetico-deductive method applied to meaningful material has at least an initial promise of faring better, and this is mostly because of the looser understanding it involves of the relationship holding between the different parts making up the circle of interpretation. In the last section of this chapter, I shall investigate the kind of contribution that Davidson's holistic account of interpretation is able to make for the outlook on interpretation sketched by Føllesdahl, especially concerning the question what sorts of factors may be relied on in the attempt to separate true prejudgments from false ones.

### *Holism and the Circular Nature of Interpretation*

Another factor that, in Føllesdal's opinion, explains the differences between the humanities and the natural sciences is the fact that rationality assumptions concerning the subject of inquiry have a vital role in applications of the hypothetico-deductive method to the human sciences, whereas in the natural sciences they have no role. This observation points out the potential relevance that Davidson's holistic account of interpretation may have for the issues at hand. As seen in the previous chapter, the core of that view maintains that mental states come as "a matched set," having logical and other kinds of relationships with each other. This implies that the attribution of one mental state involves locating it within a web of mental states and propositional attitudes. It is precisely in this picture where Davidson's contribution to the issue at hand lies, for the holistic conception of interpretation apparent in his work shows how every interpretation carries with itself assumptions about the person's mental web whose actions and products are under interpretation. What is now needed is a framework for considering whether the mental web assumed in a particular interpretation is convincing or not.

For Davidson, at a basic level, interpretation is an activity that consists of the continuous formation of interpretive hypotheses, testing how those fit with bits of experience, and altering one's hypotheses and assumptions when they fail to fit with the relevant data. That is, the prior theory with which the interpreter arrives at a particular speech or other kind of interpretive situation may prove insufficient for achieving understanding in that case, for

example because it is proven to contain false assumptions about the subject of interpretation. It is also possible that the interpreter is compelled to alter his prior theory not because it contains false assumptions, but because it is otherwise proven insufficient. For example, one reason for the incapacity of the interpreter's prior theory to provide the interpretation the speaker intends his utterance to possess is that by relying on certain clues and other sorts of contextual factors the speaker deliberately calls the interpreter to alter his prior theory so that his passing theory ultimately manages to provide the interpretation the speaker intends his utterance to possess.

Now, the supplementation that Davidson's holistic picture of interpretation manages to provide for Föllesdal's analysis is that it contains a highly detailed picture of what sorts of factors are relevant when assessing the strength of a particular set of evidence. That is, it manages to establish a foundation for considering such questions as, why certain kinds of factors lend support for a certain kind of interpretation while speaking against others, and what sorts of factors are important in evaluating the validity of the assumptions which have been relied on in the formation of a particular interpretive hypothesis. It achieves this by inserting the interpretive hypothesis into a complex account of human mentality. By doing so, Davidson's holistic account can provide an explanation of why, for example, a certain perceptual feature of an artwork serves as evidence for a particular interpretation about that work, that is, what the presence of a particular feature may be an indication of. Every interpretation involves assumptions about the mentality of the person whose actions, words, and products are under interpretation, and Davidson's holism provides a framework for considering whether those assumptions are reasonable or not. To take an example I used earlier, the interpretation of the ending of Shostakovich's fifth symphony as an apotheosis of an empty triumph is supported by referring to the tempo of the ending, which is markedly slower than in the case of other triumphant symphonies in the Western symphonic tradition. That is, the interpretation that Shostakovich intended the symphony's ending to represent an empty triumph may be supported by referring to its considerably slow tempo, for it could be argued that the composer believed that by choosing that kind of tempo for the ending a person with proper background knowledge is able to understand the ending in that way, and fortunately the members of the Politburo were not among them. One can, of course, hold a wholly different interpretation of the symphony's ending, while acknowledging that the tempo marking is indeed slow. However, what Davidson's holistic view of interpretation shows is that that interpretation would mean attributing a completely different kind of mental web for Shostakovich. It, in other words, would have to explain the presence of the slow tempo marking by other means. Or one can, of course, ignore the slow tempo as irrelevant in the way Toscanini did, that is, by claiming that Shostakovich just simply failed.

Now, the overlap between Föllesdal's account of the hypothetico-deductive method applied to meaningful material and Davidson's holistic view of interpretation is precisely shown in the way they both see interpretation to involve a particular kind of back and forth

movement between individual hypotheses and the evidence supposed to support them. In this respect, they attribute to interpretation a structure similar to the one which it is seen to possess in the hermeneutic circle. However, the significant point which emerges from Føllesdal's and Davidson's accounts is that they show how in hermeneutics too deterministic a relationship tends to be attributed between the initial assumptions interpretation springs from and the course interpretation is able to take, as well as to what sorts of hypotheses the interpretation process is ultimately able to arrive at. The cautionary factors which Georgia Warnke raises in her investigation of the hermeneutic circle, for example, reveal the structure that interpretation is seen to possess in this kind of view. In her opinion, a view of interpretation that otherwise emphasizes its situated nature, must, nevertheless, construe the circular nature of interpretation in a way that the circle does not become "a vicious one." That is, even though the interpreter cannot escape her prejudgments, their role in the interpretation process must not be construed in such a way as to become merely "self-confirming" in character.<sup>322</sup> This possible trouble with the hermeneutic circle also relates to the problem of subjectivism Warnke sees Gadamer's hermeneutics to face, that is, how one separates true understanding from distortive cases, while keeping to the essential circular and situated character of interpretation. In sum, how does one avoid the conclusion that the interpretation process does not merely end up confirming the validity of those prejudgments with which the interpreter initially approaches the work?

The way the holistic character of interpretation is construed in Føllesdal's and Davidson's accounts allows one to avoid this conclusion. In fact, from their point of view, testing the validity of interpretations, as well as the assumptions lying behind them, is a task that does not need extraordinary effort. On the contrary, if the validity of a given interpretive hypothesis depends on the consequences which may be drawn from it, these consequences stating what must be the case for the hypothesis to be believable, judging the interpretive hypothesis primarily consists of seeing whether these states of affairs obtain or not, and whether the consequences, which are supposed to lend support for the hypothesis, may be said to reasonably follow from the hypothesis. In other words, does the realization of a particular state of affairs offer support for the hypothesis? The less convincingly the consequences are considered to follow from the hypothesis, the less their realization offers support for it. It is precisely this field of problems to which the holistic view of interpretation offered by Davidson provides a substantial contribution.

Although in this scenario interpretation is essentially seen to proceed in a circular motion involving continuous efforts to make and match, it is hardly likely that the circular motion becomes a vicious circle, at least in the sense that the interpretation process would become so heavily guided by the initial hypotheses as to merely confirm them. In Gadamer's opinion, the fact that interpretation always involves prejudgments implies that "a person who is trying to

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<sup>322</sup> Warnke (1987, 87).

understand a text is always projecting,” which, in turn, has the consequence that “the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning.”<sup>323</sup> The holistic character of interpretation assumed in this view is precisely the factor which connects Gadamer’s approach to those developed by Føllesdal and Davidson. However, what their views simultaneously indicate is that hermeneutists tend to go too far in their assessment of what acknowledging the circular character of interpretation implies. In other words, while interpretation indeed always involves presuppositions, that does not mean there is a danger for those presuppositions to become merely self-confirmed by the interpretation, for though the interpreter is, indeed, always “projecting” in the sense that her activity is always guided by certain initial assumptions, the holistic picture of interpretation developed on the basis of Føllesdal’s and Davidson’s views above shows that it is possible to establish considerations concerning the validity of those assumptions guiding interpretation on a rigid foundation, while still holding on to the essential holistic character of interpretation.

## **5. Conclusions**

The defense of intentionalism carried out in this chapter can be divided into two stages. In the first case, by undermining the view on the historically conditioned nature of understanding Gadamer’s hermeneutics involves, the investigations presented in the first parts of this chapter lend indirect support to an intentionalist view of interpretation, for the critical stance a large part of contemporary hermeneutics has taken towards intentionalism has assumed that Gadamer’s hermeneutics manages to successfully describe the formation of our understanding. Now, if that is not the case, a major premise in the hermeneutic argument against intentionalism founders.

Above, it was claimed that in addition to the alleged superiority of Gadamer’s analysis of understanding and interpretation over intentionalist accounts, another important cause for the neglect of intentionalist approaches to interpretation within contemporary hermeneutics is the way they are still tightly associated with forms of hermeneutics reigning during the age of Romanticism and with the problematic views of human subjectivity those have been assumed to involve. I argued that Donald Davidson’s holistic account of interpretation, meaning, and the mental gives a possibility for formulating a view of interpretation stressing the importance of the author’s intentions on a philosophical foundation, which shares some crucial elements with hermeneutic views on interpretation and understanding. It is thus arguable that that kind of intentionalist theory does not involve those problematic assumptions which contemporary hermeneutists have attributed to the theories of Schleiermacher and Dilthey.

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<sup>323</sup> *TM*, 269; *WM*, 251.

The defense of intentionalism presented in the latter parts of this chapter took a different form. It was argued that views of interpretation which attribute a vital role to the author's intentions should undergo a revival in hermeneutic theory not because hermeneutic criticisms of intentionalism rest on shaky ground, but because of a particular insufficiency Gadamer's hermeneutics was seen to be troubled by. While acknowledging the need to separate true prejudgments from false ones, Gadamer's hermeneutics was seen to be unable to provide ample resources for such a separation. This conclusion was not only taken to show that the differences between Hirsch's literary theory and Gadamer's hermeneutics are not as severe as some of Gadamer's followers have made them out to be, it also provides strong grounds for granting intentionalist views on interpretation a new hearing within hermeneutics, for the question regarding the foundations of validity in interpretation forms the core of that approach.

This conclusion led to a discussion of Føllesdal's reading of the hermeneutic method as the hypothetico-deductive method applied to meaningful material, which was then supplemented by Davidson's ideas on the holistic nature of interpretation. That investigation proved relevant, for it showed how one is able to hold on to the view that interpretation essentially proceeds in a circular manner, that is, as a form of making and matching between parts and wholes, without letting the circular motion involved become a vicious one. This is precisely the trouble Warnke saw lurking behind the view of interpretation involved in the hermeneutic circle, and which, in her opinion, compels Gadamer to provide a more rigid foundation for assessing which prejudgments allow us to understand truthfully and which merely distort understanding. However, at least the means offered by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* for meeting this challenge were considered unsuccessful. It is precisely this defect in Gadamer's hermeneutic account of interpretation which Føllesdal's and Davidson's views were considered to be able to fill. So, it seems that, in the end, everybody wins.

Jaufré

Have you recited my poems to her?

The Pilgrim

My memory is not good enough, I merely hummed.

Jaufré (*almost shouting with rage*)

Merely! What do you mean by merely? I spend my days and nights composing my songs, each not and each rhyme of which must pass the sternest test. I undress and dress twenty times, thirty times, before I find the precise word that has been hanging in the sky for all eternity, awaiting its destination. And you, you merely recited them? You merely hummed them? You wretch! You wretch! How could you betray me thus and go on to pretending to be my friend?

Kaija Saariaho, *L'amour du loin*, act three, libretto Amin Maalouf

## IV Richard Rorty's Pragmatist Challenge to Intentionalism

Although Donald Davidson's philosophical views did not have a substantial effect on the critical reading of modern philosophy which Richard Rorty presents in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), in time Rorty received his most significant analytic influences from Davidson. In particular, Davidson's views on language, as well as the way Davidson sees the relationship between mind and world to be constructed, signified for Rorty "the culmination of the holist and pragmatist strains in contemporary analytic philosophy."<sup>324</sup> Given the influence that these elements of Davidson's philosophy have had on Rorty, it is strange what different views their respective theories of interpretation exemplify and, furthermore, how seldom these differences have been observed, let alone carefully considered in the literature.<sup>325</sup> While Davidson's texts on literature and interpretation support a form of intentionalism, as has become apparent already in this thesis, in Rorty's pragmatist theory, the author's intentions have virtually no position at all, but Rorty, instead, insists on a radical form of interpretive pluralism.

In this chapter, the two main topics of this thesis – the strength of intentionalist accounts of interpretation and relativism in interpretation – are addressed as they arise in Rorty's views on interpretation and the cultural position set for literature in his work. Rorty's approach to these issues is connected with the different strands of his general pragmatist philosophy. According to Björn Ramberg, Rorty's philosophy as a whole is divided into a negative and a positive side. The former consists of Rorty's metaphilosophical project of undermining what he takes to be the defining project of modern philosophy, which gave rise to the conception of

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<sup>324</sup> Rorty (1991, 117).

<sup>325</sup> For example, there are no references to Rorty's views in the articles Dasenbrock (2002), Stroud-Drinkwater (2002), and Hagberg (2002) that comprise the symposium "Davidson and Literary Understanding" in *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 26 (2002).

the human mind in which it was likened to a mirror of nature, and which saw philosophy as a discipline whose task it was to uncover the conditions under which that mirror could be said to represent reality most accurately. The positive side, in turn, outlines an intellectual culture in which the metaphors resulting from the traditional problems of epistemology no longer serve as guiding principles, but instead Rorty explores the ways in which philosophy can make a fuller and more wide-ranging contribution to the edification of human culture.<sup>326</sup>

Especially in analytic circles Rorty's views on interpretation have not been that extensively discussed. It has also gone largely unnoticed that Rorty's work on interpretation and literature poses a serious challenge to intentionalist approaches to interpretation and that they raise issues which have not been previously examined in depth. The account of Rorty's philosophical views offered by Ramberg gives a possibility for looking at Rorty's criticism of intentionalism from two sides. In the first case, an intentionalist approach is seen to involve assumptions similar to those which make a large part of modern philosophy suspect in Rorty's eyes. The intentionalist at least implicitly commits himself to a distinction between what properties a work of art has in itself and what it acquires as a result of our changing needs and practices. For Rorty, Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance demonstrates that intentionalist views truly involve this kind of assumption. On the other hand, the pragmatist-oriented philosopher calls precisely this sort of distinction into question. From the emphasis that the pragmatist puts on practices and contextuality it follows that the question regarding the validity of interpretation becomes a practice-internal question as well, which is to say that it always happens against the backdrop of a certain cultural or historical setting and the norms and values it involves. For these reasons, the author's intentions cannot serve as a basis for grounding the validity of interpretations as the intentionalist assumes.<sup>327</sup>

In the second case, which I shall here dub the Postmetaphysical Critique for sake of convenience, Rorty's reasons for finding intentionalism an impoverished approach follows from the position Rorty outlines for literature and literary theory in his postmetaphysical culture sketched on the ruins of epistemology-centered philosophy. The importance of literature for this kind of culture follows from the emphasis that is laid on the enhancement of solidarity in the approach to ethics it adopts. In a postmetaphysical period, "moral philosophy takes the form of historical narration and utopian speculation rather than of a search for general principles."<sup>328</sup> Thus, through their narrative form literary works become important modes of moral investigation and possible sources of the kind of attentiveness which, in Rorty's opinion, is a desirable capacity in a society founded on the importance of solidarity. Uncovering the elements that make literary works significant for Rorty's postmetaphysical view of ethics, however, requires a specific kind of approach to them, and Rorty does not consider an intentionalist theory to be such an approach.

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<sup>326</sup> Ramberg (2001).

<sup>327</sup> Rorty (1992, 93-94).

<sup>328</sup> Rorty (1989, 60).



Now, both sides of the intentionalist critique which may be drawn from Rorty's work raise issues which have not been taken into proper consideration before. As pointed out in chapter two, modest versions of intentionalism currently supported in analytic philosophy of art are very rarely formulated against the backdrop of a systematic philosophical account of the human mind. Rorty's approach to philosophy of mind not only criticizes certain answers to individual philosophical problems, but, ultimately, questions the very soundness of a particular, and, in Rorty's opinion dominant framework in which the mind has been philosophically thought about. Consequently, taking up Rorty's critique stemming from his critique of modern philosophy, here referred to as the Inner Eye Critique, may be said to steer the issue of intentionalism towards more fundamental waters than has previously been the case.

Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique, in turn, connects philosophy of interpretation with a wholly different kind of question. In this case, it raises issues similar to those which have motivated some philosophers to ascribe an important role to literature in moral philosophy. The challenge this aspect of Rorty's work poses for intentionalist approaches is that it suggests that theories of interpretation should take the ethical significance of literature into account and that intentionalism is a view which does not manage this in a successful manner.

In the previous chapter, Davidson's ideas initially introduced in chapter two proved relevant, for the intentionalist theory developed there on the basis of them managed to show that some of the criticisms of that interpretative position which have appeared in contemporary hermeneutics rested on certain misguided and outdated assumptions. The contribution of Davidson's views on an intentionalist theory of interpretation, however, is not exhausted by the use they were put in the previous chapter, but they prove highly relevant for assessing the ultimate standing of the intentionalist critique Rorty's work involves. In fact, it is my belief, that Davidson's work contains elements which call into question both sides of Rorty's intentionalist critique.

## ***1. The Inner Eye Critique of Intentionalism***

Rorty's work does not contain extensive discussions in which he would connect the view of the human mind he opposes with the standing of intentionalist theories of interpretation. However, some comments made by Rorty suggest that he does indeed hold the view that the kind of primacy given to the author's intentions in this approach assumes a relationship between mind and world similar to the one the metaphor mirror of nature is intended to capture. The only version of intentionalism which Rorty discusses at length is E.D. Hirsch's literary theory. One of the elements which Rorty sees as problematic is the philosophical background of Hirsch's theory. Although his theory can hardly be considered a simple application of a philosophical theory of meaning to the field of literary theory, it,

nevertheless, draws heavily at times on Edmund Husserl's phenomenological account of meaning.<sup>329</sup> However, it is precisely the Husserlian undercurrents of Hirsch's views which render them suspect in Rorty's eyes,<sup>330</sup> and he, in fact, explicitly contrasts the kind of "building block" view of the mind Rorty thinks this approach is committed to with the holistic outlook he supports, and with which he tries to dethrone the dominance of the representationalist paradigm.<sup>331</sup>

This strand of Rorty's critique of intentionalism is interesting, for it immediately points out the relevance of Davidson's views. This is because while Davidson and Rorty share a holistic conception of the human mind, and, for example, attack a form of philosophy in which epistemological problems are considered to form the core problems of philosophy from this viewpoint, they, nevertheless, draw different conclusions from this kind of holistic emphasis for interpretation. Rorty's brief comments overlook the possibility that an intentionalist theory of interpretation could, in fact, be formulated on a very different kind of view of the human mind than the one he believes underpins Hirsch's theory. It is precisely this possibility that Davidson's work reveals. As we saw in chapter two, Rorty has been highly inspired by the holistic conception of the human mind found in Davidson's work, and in Rorty's view, the implications of Davidson's ideas, in fact, become one of the most important formulations with which to undermine the representationalist conception of the human mind. According to Rorty, the ultimate moral that should be drawn from Davidson's holism is that we should "think of the collection of those things [mental states] as *being* the self rather than as something which the self *has*. The latter notion is a leftover of the traditional Western temptation to model thinking on vision, to postulate an 'inner eye' which inspects inner states."<sup>332</sup>

Rorty, moreover, thinks that because of the scattered nature of Davidson's publication record "it falls to his admirers to attempt a synoptic view of his work," as well as to consider its implications for certain age-old philosophical questions, like skepticism, for example.<sup>333</sup> However, as pointed out in chapter two, in the later phases of his philosophical career Davidson began to consider the wider relevance of his views for the same questions that Rorty concentrated. In both cases the result was, in Marc Joseph's words, "a critique of traditional idea about truth, scepticism and relativism, and the relation of subjectivity and objectivity."<sup>334</sup> In this respect, it is not a surprise that, like Rorty, Davidson sees his own philosophy a part of a more general philosophical development in which "a revised view of the relation of mind and the world" is insisted upon.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> See, for example, Hirsch (1984, 203-204).

<sup>330</sup> Rorty (1991, 88).

<sup>331</sup> Ibid. (150n61).

<sup>332</sup> Ibid. (123).

<sup>333</sup> Ibid. (113).

<sup>334</sup> Joseph (2004, 102).

<sup>335</sup> Davidson (2001, 43).

Now, observing these similarities between Davidson's and Rorty's thinking do not merely serve exegetical purposes, but the above account, in fact, shows problems in the assumptions on which Rorty's Inner Eye Critique of intentionalism rest. That is, the kind of connection that may be drawn between holism and intentionalism on the basis of Davidson's views suggests that an intentionalist theory of interpretation does not have to involve the sort of view of the human mind found deplorable by Rorty in any kind of inevitable way, but that it can, ultimately, be built upon a similar view of the mind that Rorty holds. This, in turn, implies that even if Rorty's criticism of Hirsch's literary theory were accurate, it, nevertheless, fails to evolve into a general criticism of an intentionalist approach to interpretation, eventually covering every possible formulation of the view. For both Rorty and Davidson, holism marks "a distrust of the whole epistemological enterprise."<sup>336</sup> However, the way Davidson combines holism with an intentionalist view of interpretation shows that that distrust need not imply a similar assessment in philosophy of interpretation. That is, commitment to holism does not entail a need to give up on the attempt to form a foundation for assessing the validity of interpretations and neither does it compel one to abandon intentionalist conceptions of interpretation.

## ***2. The Postmetaphysical Critique of Intentionalism***

This reply to Rorty's Inner Eye Critique is as short as are Rorty's comments on the larger philosophical background assumptions he believes intentionalist views of interpretation involve. However, it is rather in the Postmetaphysical Critique where the full thrust of the critical view of intentionalism involved in Rorty's pragmatism becomes apparent, for it is tightly connected to different parts of his philosophical work. Together these form a highly powerful and interesting critique of intentionalism which raises issues into consideration in relation to which the standing of intentionalist views have not been examined in depth before.

Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique challenges intentionalist theories of interpretation by drawing attention to features of literary works which make them valuable in relation to certain ethico-societal issues that have a fundamental position in Rorty's liberal culture. The core of the Postmetaphysical Critique maintains that intentionalist theories are ill-equipped to meet those challenges Rorty's postmetaphysical culture sets for literature. One of the central values holding this kind of society together is the feeling of solidarity between human beings. Rorty does not, however, believe that its centrality follows from some kind of metaphysical ground, but, rather, its crucial nature should be understood in more pragmatic terms. That is, "the right way to take the slogan 'We have obligations to human beings

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<sup>336</sup> Rorty (1979, 181). Compare with Davidson (2001, 47).

simply as such' is as a means of reminding ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of 'us' as far as we can..., to create a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have."<sup>337</sup>

Because of the central position reserved for solidarity, Rorty thinks that moral reflection characteristic of his postmetaphysical culture should be guided by an attitude "against theory, toward[s] narrative." Here narrative is understood as a form of discourse which gives up the attempt to establish the binding nature of vocabularies and moral intuitions on a connection between reality lying beyond human traditions and practices. Instead, it focuses on contemplating the variety of aspects involved in human encounters.<sup>338</sup> While narrative investigations embrace the contingent and creative features of human life, thus taking the side of poetry in the age-old debate between poetry and philosophy over their bearing on human life, theory strives "to achieve universality by the transcendence of contingency."<sup>339</sup> Even though the acceptance of contingency becomes the favored attitude this does not, in Rorty's opinion, remove the importance of solidarity, but just the terms in which it should be understood; "solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting...."<sup>340</sup> Solidarity is, therefore, for Rorty an inherently local phenomenon, which is to say that it must be constructed out of different elements in different contexts, rather than something to be explained in terms of a common human nature people share.

Rorty's belief in literature's capacity to serve an important function in his postmetaphysical, liberal culture follows from the central place that solidarity occupies in it, as well as from what Rorty takes its enhancement to require.<sup>341</sup> By providing their readers with descriptions of "strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), [and] strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons)," literary works provide descriptions of encounters between human beings which the reader may not previously have had to face, thus enabling him to reflect on the problems and challenges these unfamiliar situations pose for human beings, as well as the ways in which the different values and interests coming into conflict in them can be connected with one another.<sup>342</sup> These features, in turn, may give rise to more refined descriptions for people's conceptual armory with which they relate to other human beings and groups. This is the reason why Rorty finds literature an important mode of discourse in his postmetaphysical culture. That is, since for Rorty the enhancement of solidarity essentially involves the creation of descriptions on the basis of which it is possible to discern salient features between human groups, and to see certain differences as irrelevant when compared to these features, literature can ultimately increase its presence.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Rorty (1989, 196).

<sup>338</sup> Ibid. (xvi).

<sup>339</sup> Ibid. (25).

<sup>340</sup> Ibid. (94).

<sup>341</sup> Ibid. (60).

<sup>342</sup> Ibid. (80).

<sup>343</sup> Ibid. (107).

The fulfillment of those needs Rorty's postmetaphysical culture sets for literature, however, requires a particular approach. That Rorty finds intentionalist theories of interpretation insufficient with regard to these challenges may be seen from the position Rorty assigns for a person he calls "the liberal ironist" in his postmetaphysical culture. Since this sort of person holds an utterly skeptical attitude towards the existence of intrinsic natures, she believes that there is no privileged way in which objects should be approached. This depends, instead, on the changing desires of our culture, as well as on the specific needs a particular situation may call for. Redescriptions of objects and events serve as the primary tool with which the ironist pursues those transformations she finds her culture to be in need of. In Rorty's words, "ironists specialize in redescribing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon."<sup>344</sup>

Since Rorty considers "literary criticism" a more up-to-date name with which to capture the characteristic features of the liberal ironist's activity, Rorty's views on interpretation become intimately connected with his account of this individual.<sup>345</sup> In particular, that Rorty draws this kind of connection between the two indicates that a theory guided by intentionalist principles is a long way from being an approach, which is able to provide those tools for the ironist that the position sketched for her by Rorty require. Rather, the liberal ironist takes her inspiration from such interpreters as Harold Bloom, that is, from a critic who asks "neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary... on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens."<sup>346</sup>

### ***3. Rorty's Theory of Interpretation and the Problem of Relativism***

The approach to literature Rorty's sketch of a postmetaphysical culture involves could be considered admirable in the context of philosophy of art since it attaches a value to literature which is exceptional in philosophy. Nevertheless, that view also comes with a price, for it raises certain problems for Rorty's account of interpretation which may ultimately be damaging to its general credibility. The problem Rorty is now in danger of confronting is a difficulty which his general pragmatist philosophy has frequently had to face. The claim is that Rorty's philosophical views embody conceptions of truth, knowledge, and reality that make his theory as a whole no different from some form of relativism. That Rorty's views ultimately lead to this conclusion is seen to follow from his way of abandoning realistic

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid. (78).

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Rorty (1982, 151).

conceptions of truth and from his denial that the justification of beliefs, conceptions, and values could be built on a firm basis once the idea of this kind of truth has been relinquished.

Arguments against relativistic ideas with a form similar to the one addressed to Rorty have also appeared in philosophy of interpretation. In this case, relativism has been opposed by arguing that commitment to relativism is in danger of putting the very meaningfulness of criticism in doubt. This is an assumption which is shared by theorists who otherwise support significantly opposing views on interpretation, such as E.D. Hirsch and Monroe C. Beardsley. They both see a shared standard against which the comparative validity of interpretations can be assessed as the prerequisite of the meaningfulness of criticism and interpretation.<sup>347</sup> Their disagreement precisely concerns the question what sort of entity can serve such a purpose. Since Rorty does not feel the need to posit the kind of standard whose acknowledgment both Beardsley and Hirsch have considered underpins the meaningfulness of criticism, it would seem possible to undermine the view of interpretation Rorty supports by relying on factors similar to those that have come up in the criticisms addressed to his more general philosophical views.

In fact, a substantial part of the commentary literature on Rorty's pragmatism focuses precisely on the question whether the theory does involve relativistic implications, and whether this conclusion would have substantial consequences for its general validity. The recurrence of the charge of relativism did not, however, weaken Rorty's trust in the ability of his theory to overcome the problem of relativism.<sup>348</sup> For example, a decisive reason that, in Rorty's opinion, speaks against his theory being considered a form of relativism is that it offers no positive account of truth. To be sure, one of its chief goals is to replace realistic conceptions of truth with a view in which the validity and justification of theories can only be assessed on the basis of our current beliefs, not on the basis of how they correspond to a reality independent of them. However, to embrace this kind of outlook on justification does not lead to the view that truth is *defined* relative to those beliefs and conceptions we at a certain point of time hold. What this observation, in Rorty's opinion, shows is that the view does not involve the relativistic conception according to which truth is *defined* relative to something, be that a culture, a conceptual scheme or some other kind of vocabulary.<sup>349</sup>

Despite Rorty's numerous replies, skeptical voices still prevail which do not see Rorty's way of overcoming the problem of relativism as convincing.<sup>350</sup> Now, although the relativistic consequences of Rorty's pragmatism have been considered many times before, I shall nevertheless take the issue up again here. My primary motivation for doing so is that it is my belief that the factors which appear with regard to the Postmetaphysical Critique of intentionalism provide a novel framework in which to consider it. In particular, this approach

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<sup>347</sup> Hirsch (1967, 26); Beardsley (1970).

<sup>348</sup> See, for example, Rorty (1979, 373-379), (1991, 23-24, 30, 66-67), (1993), (1999, xvi-xxxii), (2000).

<sup>349</sup> Rorty (1991, 50).

<sup>350</sup> See for example, Baghramian (2004, 144-151); Blackburn (2005).

to the issue gives a possibility for considering whether the metaphilosophical factors Rorty has relied on in his attempt to overcome the charge of relativism are convincing. Rorty's response may be characterized as metaphilosophical in character, for it seeks to move the whole issue onto a different level. In other words, Rorty ultimately refuses to meet his critics on their own turf, but rather he tries to undermine the authority of the philosophical framework which, in Rorty's opinion, gives fuel to the argument presented by those who oppose his views.

It is worthwhile to take up Rorty's metaphilosophical argument in this context, for in philosophy of art a similar kind of argument has been presented in favour of relativistic accounts of interpretation. While discussing the standing of intentionalist theories of interpretation, Noël Carroll invents an argument which is intended to explore whether reliance on factors which Carroll collects under the heading "reasons of art" would lend support for relativistic theories of interpretation with implications similar to those Rorty's theory involves. The core of this argument insists that while it is indeed the case that intentionalist theories of interpretation manage to overcome certain problems to which theories of a more relativistic bent have been seen to fall into, this still does not give sufficient reasons for favoring intentionalism over a view of interpretation embodying a relativistic attitude towards justification. This is because the view of engagement with artworks implied by an intentionalist approach is characterized by features which may be argued to be inconsistent with a widely held conception regarding the origins of art's value. For example, such factors which are linked with art's capacity to be thought provoking and a source of aesthetic experience well after a given artwork has been completed. The "reasons of art" argument invented by Carroll draws attention to the possibility that by setting boundaries on how artworks are to be approached derived from the author's intentions intentionalist views may in some ways be incompatible with the supposed inexhaustible nature of art. Since it is arguable that theories of interpretation should at least to a certain extent try to accommodate these features within their approach, the issue between intentionalism and relativism involves more complicated factors than figures such as Beardsley and Hirsch have presumed.<sup>351</sup>

Now, although Carroll does not explicitly refer to Rorty's pragmatism while developing "the reasons of art" argument against intentionalism, the factors which emerge in it are similar in kind to the metaphilosophical reasons on which Rorty seeks to ground his postmetaphysical approach to literature. For example, Rorty claims that the pragmatist view of interpretation he develops does not receive its justification from traditional metaphysical and epistemological backup, but rather from the inspiring examples, i.e., creative interpretations, that it encourages and for which it clears a space.<sup>352</sup> This way of defending his interpretive approach is connected with the metaphilosophical factors Rorty relies on in support of his general pragmatism. These metaphilosophical reasons, in Rorty's opinion, call

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<sup>351</sup> Carroll (2001/1992, 170).

<sup>352</sup> Rorty (1982, 154).

for a reevaluation of the charge of relativism, for it undermines the philosophical framework on which the argument's power rests, that is, the sort of framework which is structured according to various Platonic dualisms. Instead of "relativists," Rorty maintains that a more accurate name for philosophers such as himself would be "anti-Platonists." That is, "we anti-Platonists cannot permit ourselves to be called 'relativists,' since that description begs the central question. That central question is about the utility of the vocabulary which we inherited from Plato and Aristotle."<sup>353</sup>

Hilary Putnam has perhaps most persistently argued that Rorty's pragmatism ultimately falls into an unacceptable form of relativism. In one of his many replies to Putnam, Rorty again refuses to accept what his theory is being accused of, because he thinks that the very terms must be altered with which the merits of a given conception or theory is to be judged. That is, rather than seeing this as a metaphysical question regarding how our theories and vocabularies correspond to an independent reality, justification should be considered an issue that concerns the "convenience" of our theories and vocabularies.<sup>354</sup> For Rorty, this transformation precisely means that philosophical debates are modulated from "a methodological key" into an "ethico-political key," in the sense that "now one is debating what purposes are worth bothering to fulfill..."<sup>355</sup>

Now, once Rorty's argument against intentionalism is framed in these terms, it becomes apparent that his criticism of intentionalism does not merely consist of showing that the thesis presupposes certain dubious conceptions of the human mind, but rather it aims to question the very convenience of such theories. Once Rorty's theory of interpretation is set up against his social goals it turns out to be manifestly "a recommendation." In other words, it suggests that certain topics have become unprofitable, and that they should be abandoned in favor of questions which are more relevant in the light of those needs and concerns that emerge in Rorty's postmetaphysical culture.<sup>356</sup> In this respect, Rorty's account of interpretation and his societal goals meet. At the end, his theory of interpretation may be seen as "just one more terminological suggestion made on behalf of the same cause, the cause of providing contemporary liberal culture with a vocabulary which is all its own, cleansing it of the residues of a vocabulary which was suited to the needs of former days."<sup>357</sup> Evidently, Rorty considers an interpretation theory which is grounded in intentionalist terminology and which understands validity in its terms as this kind of obsolete theory. Mirror or no mirror, by setting definite boundaries on interpretations, intentionalist theories become incapable of responding to those challenges Rorty sees literary theory and literature face in a postmetaphysical culture. The author's intentions have to be discarded so that literature's capacity to provide novel descriptions for addressing moral and societal questions can come to its fullest. This is what

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<sup>353</sup> Rorty (1999, xviii).

<sup>354</sup> Rorty (1993, 457).

<sup>355</sup> Rorty (1991, 110).

<sup>356</sup> Ibid. (154)

<sup>357</sup> Rorty (1989, 55).



Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique ultimately amounts to, and it provides a novel viewpoint on some of the central topics in philosophy of interpretation.

#### **4. Interpretation and Imagination: Does Rorty's Ironist need to be a Bloomian?**

There is an issue that provides an interesting framework for considering Rorty's challenge, namely imagination. There are basically three reasons why I think the phenomenon of imagination provides an interesting perspective on Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique. First, imagination is a capacity which is in many ways connected with the central values and virtues of Rorty's liberalism, such as openmindedness and the ability to weigh different options. Both capacities require the use of imagination, at least to a certain degree. Second, the importance of imagination for Rorty's liberalism is due to the place that faculty may be seen to hold in the liberal ironist's activity. That is, the more refined her imagination, the more refined redescriptions she is presumably able to produce, her activities thus becoming more profitable in regard to Rorty's postmetaphysical needs the more her imagination functions improve.<sup>358</sup>

The third and most important reason why I have decided to take up the issue of imagination here is that some pragmatist-inspired moral philosophers have recently argued that imagination should, in fact, hold a vital role in moral reflection. Their approach to ethics shares motivations and goals with Rorty's postmetaphysical view of moral theory. For example, echoing Rorty's wish to construct moral theory on a more narrative foundation, Steven Fesmire argues that moral philosophy should no longer take as its goal a search for universal principles, but it should, instead, pay more attention to the "situational exigencies" moral situations involve and the way people are capable of making sense of them. For Fesmire, this development requires "a shift in the centre of gravity of ethics from foundational principles to imagination...."<sup>359</sup> Moral situations may, and often do involve different, possibly conflicting interests and ambiguities, which cannot be resolved in a straightforward manner by, for example, relying on a rule whose force everybody of relevance acknowledges. Consequently, reflective moral deliberation must be accompanied by a faculty which manages to take hold of the complexities a particular situation may exhibit. Fesmire believes imagination is precisely such a capacity. Fesmire follows John Dewey in regarding imagination as a capacity that allows one to creatively tap a situation's possibilities.<sup>360</sup> This aspect of imagination is precisely that feature of it which explains the prospects Fesmire believes it to possess for moral reflection. That is, imagination enables

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<sup>358</sup> See especially the interview with Rorty in Ragg (2002, 372-373).

<sup>359</sup> Fesmire (2003, 3).

<sup>360</sup> Ibid. (65).

one to “engage the present” in a way that attention is expanded “beyond what is immediately experienced so that the lessons of the past, embodied in habits, and as-yet-unrealized potentialities ‘come home to us and have the power to stir us.’”<sup>361</sup>

Rorty’s and Fesmire’s approaches are also similar in that they both emphasize the possibility for improving people’s capacity to engage in moral situations. While for Rorty, this development is related to the role redescrptions have in enhancing the presence of solidarity, Fesmire connects the issue more specifically with imagination, that is, “the more refined one’s imagination (a function of relevant habits), the richer the fund of germane possibilities and the more reliable one’s valuations.”<sup>362</sup>

Fesmire’s and Rorty’s accounts of ethics do not merely share the above assumptions with each other. Fesmire’s approach is able to make a more detailed contribution to Rorty’s goals and ambitions as well. In particular, the role Fesmire ascribes to imagination in moral reflection sheds light on the ways in which the realization of the values Rorty’s liberalism is founded on can be secured and made more widespread. By enlarging the resources from which to draw material for one’s evaluation of the situation at hand, and by developing the capacity to entertain the elements of a complex whole, as well as the capacity to see how the elements that whole consists of might be put together, imagination is connected with those capacities Rorty sees the enhancement of solidarity requires, such as the capacity to provide adequate descriptions for the needs of a particular situation and to create novel ones once new, perhaps unforeseeable situations emerge. Consequently, one way in which the culture Rorty outlines may promote the realization of its central values is to find ways of developing and enlarging the imagination of its inhabitants. Rorty should, in other words, find the same capacities desirable whose importance for moral reflection Fesmire emphasizes.

Given that Rorty’s postmetaphysical view of ethical theory shares these underlying assumptions and goals with the tradition of pragmatist ethics which emphasizes the role of imagination in moral reflection, it is not surprising that in some later works of his Rorty emphasizes the cultural and social importance of imagination more explicitly than before, Rorty, for example claiming that one of the significant implications of the kind of pragmatism he advocates is that the progress which has happened in various fields of human life in past centuries should be taken as a sign of peoples’ capacity to expand their imaginations, rather than of their “increased ability to represent reality accurately.”<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid. (67).

<sup>362</sup> Ibid. (71).

<sup>363</sup> Rorty (2007, 117).

## *The Place of Imagination in Davidsonian Intentionalism*

The connections between Fesmire's and Rorty's approaches to ethics specified in the previous section give a possibility for reformulating Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique of intentionalism in terms of the role Fesmire ascribes to imagination in moral reflection. The question that now becomes relevant is whether an intentionalist theory can embrace those factors which explain the importance Fesmire attaches to imagination, as well as the ways he believes that faculty can be refined. If this is the case, Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique is undermined, for it shows that literature's capacity to play a role in promoting the central values of Rorty's postmetaphysical culture need not be supported by the kind of pragmatist account of interpretation Rorty himself supports. In fact, Bryan Vescio, one of the few who have considered the relationship between Rorty's and Davidson's views of literary interpretation, resolves the disagreement apparent in them in favour of Rorty's position precisely because he believes it is better equipped to highlight those aspects of literature which make them important instruments for refining the kinds of capacities in question here. In Vescio's opinion, this is a result from Rorty's emphasis "that our interpretation of literature... [is] constrained only by our purposes and ingenuity, and not by entities called 'meanings' or 'intentions,'" this kind of view, thus, showing more tolerance towards "imaginative interpretations" than those theories which ask us to constrain our interpretations by the author's intentions, such as Davidson's.<sup>364</sup> However, the problem with Vescio's account is that it overlooks certain crucial aspects of Davidson's thinking on interpretation, such as the role imagination can be seen to ultimately occupy in it. Once the full implications of these aspects have been drawn, Davidson's theory of literary interpretation appears far more compelling than Vescio's assessment assumes. This conclusion simultaneously forms an illuminating basis for a more detailed critical examination of Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique of intentionalism.

At this point, the reading of Davidson's later texts on philosophy of language offered in chapter two becomes highly relevant. This is because it provides initial indication of the position of imagination in Davidsonian intentionalism. That imagination acquires an important position in Davidson's views on interpretation follows directly from the critique of conventionalist theories of meaning which forms the unifying thread of his late philosophy of language. In Davidson's opinion, conventionalist approaches to communication, such as Kripkenstein's, have neglected the fact that in many cases the success of communication is based on individual and passing elements which the interlocutors may not have encountered before, and for which they have, thus, not had the possibility of preparing for in advance. That is, if there really is no saying what elements, ultimately, make successful communication

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<sup>364</sup> Vescio (1998, 209).

possible, but that this may depend on such factors as “knowledge of the character, dress, role, sex of the speaker,”<sup>365</sup> and which may change radically with regard to different contexts and, even, from speaker to speaker, then in many cases linguistic interaction must be accompanied by a faculty that manages to pick out those individual features of the communication situation that are relevant for understanding in the case at hand. In chapter two, following Davidson’s own choice of terminology, I named this capacity “imagination.”

Davidson’s example of the prose of James Joyce serves as an illuminating example of how significant a role imagination may ultimately occupy in interpretation. This is because it points out the multifarious nature of those factors which serve to make communication possible, Joyce, for example, drawing on such resources as “knowledge of history, geography, past writers, and styles.”<sup>366</sup> These features of Joyce’s prose also explain the difference Davidson draws between Humpty Dumpty and Joyce. In his view, Humpty failed to mean what he intended precisely because he did not give the appropriate clues to his interlocutor to gear her passing theory so that it could provide the meaning Humpty intended his utterance to possess. While dense and nonsensical seeming at first, the case is, in Davidson’s opinion, different with Joyce’s prose. That is, unlike Joyce, Humpty’s linguistic behavior left his interpreter “entangled.”<sup>367</sup>

The example of Joyce shows that in the Davidsonian picture, the operation of imagination involves two closely related layers. That is, the interpretation of Joyce not only requires a capacity to identify the resources Joyce is drawing on in his works, namely, history, geography, past writers, and styles, but also an ability to grasp the effect they are intended to have on the context where Joyce inserts them. This process requires drawing connections between different elements and understanding how they fuse together similar to that involved in the use of imagination. However, since the clues which serve as a fuel for imagination are hard to dig up, “as much is demanded from the reader as of the author.” That is, “by fragmentating familiar languages and recycling the raw material Joyce provokes the reader into involuntary collaboration.... The center of creative energy is thus moved from the artist to a point between the writer and his audience.”<sup>368</sup>

### *The Imaginative, Aesthetic Experience, and Intentionalism*

The specific role which Davidson’s views attribute to imagination in interpretation implies that Vescio’s assessment of the prospects of Davidson’s intentionalism introduced above is overhasty. A more detailed account of the ways in which that account may be connected with

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<sup>365</sup> Davidson (2005/1986, 100).

<sup>366</sup> Davidson (2005/1989, 147).

<sup>367</sup> Ibid. (153).

<sup>368</sup> Ibid. (156-157).

the pragmatist view of ethics emphasizing the role of imagination in moral reflection is, however, required so that a final assessment of Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique can be provided.

Observing another factor that Rorty's and Fesmire's approaches to ethics share allows a deeper investigation of the kind of role imagination obtains in an intentionalist view of interpretation built upon Davidson's views. While Rorty believes that the sort of position literature acquires in his postmetaphysical culture puts a sharp distinction between "the moral and the 'merely' aesthetic" in doubt,<sup>369</sup> Fesmire, in turn, thinks that certain elements of John Dewey's aesthetic theory become important for the kind of imagination-centered moral philosophy he outlines.<sup>370</sup>

As is well known, Dewey's texts on aesthetics primarily deal with aesthetic experience. For Dewey, aesthetic experience involves an interaction between the viewer and the object of experience which is not stable but involves an "ordered change" and "participation." It is by nature "cumulative," proceeding from "suspense" to "fulfillment."<sup>371</sup> It is, therefore, essentially *an* experience that stands out from the stream of experiences that the world constantly impinges on us as a demarcated unity. Pragmatist ethics does not see an experience of this form as alien to the field of ethics. Rather, it maintains that "moral conduct is helpfully conceived on the model of aesthetic perception."<sup>372</sup>

Now, the way in which Fesmire appropriates Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience for his purposes brings out features of Dewey's understanding of that form of experience which have not always been observed in the literature. It is a quite customary feature of Dewey's reception within different disciplines, from philosophy of music education to everyday aesthetics, to be inspired by those sides of Dewey's work in which the holistic and anti-dualistic features of aesthetic experience are highlighted. These appropriations of Dewey's thinking thus give the impression that Dewey would not be willing to introduce definitive factors on which aesthetic experience could be demarcated from other kinds of experiences.<sup>373</sup> This sort of understanding of Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience, however, overlooks the fact that Dewey does introduce features that, in his opinion, are, if not definitive, at least distinctive of experiences that he regards as aesthetic. Perhaps the most important among these is the position that Dewey reserves within his account of aesthetic experience for the vital role played by imagination.

Imagination is, of course, a highly-loaded word in philosophy, and the faculty denoted by that word has been understood in different ways in the course of its history. With the term

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<sup>369</sup> Rorty (1989, 82).

<sup>370</sup> Fesmire (2003, 4).

<sup>371</sup> Dewey (1980, 3-4; 16-17; 35-37).

<sup>372</sup> Fesmire (2003, 4).

<sup>373</sup> For example, Heidi Westerlund, a Dewey-inspired theorist in the philosophy of music education, writes that "Dewey's aesthetic is not something we can separate from other experiences and experience as such" (Westerlund 2003, 54).

“imagination,” however, Dewey denotes not so much a capacity of spontaneously imagining things, as a capacity to collect and compose individual things into a complex whole, and to build different relationships between the individual parts that make up the whole. Or to put it in Dewey’s own words:

If we judge [imagination’s] nature from the creation of works of art, it designates a quality that animates and pervades all processes of making and observation. It is a *way* of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole. It is the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination.<sup>374</sup>

For Dewey, imagination, in other words, is not so much a mental power consisting of imagining things that a person can switch on and off at will, as something that needs external input to be triggered.

Now, what is important to note is the distinction Dewey makes between two forms of imagination. These are the imaginative and the imaginary. The feature which distinguishes these two forms from each other is that they involve different constraints. While in the imaginary sense, imagination is allowed to play as freely as possible with the material serving as its basis, imaginative uses of imagination always spring from a foundation involving various kinds of constraints, which create boundaries for the course it can ultimately take. In this respect, in the imaginative case there is a more determinate connection between where imagination starts and what it ends up producing than is the case with the imaginary.<sup>375</sup>

This particular difference between the two senses of imagination, however, brings out those reasons why Fesmire only stresses the importance of the form of imagination Dewey denotes with the term “imaginative.” This is precisely because it involves the kinds of constraints the imaginary sense lacks, moral reflection guided by the imaginative sense thus being more rigorous by nature than a discourse where the imaginary sense would occupy an essential position. If anything, the imaginary sense becomes an unwanted component in moral reflection, for by being allowed to fly as freely as possible, moral deliberation guided by the imaginary sense of imagination is, in Fesmire’s opinion, in danger of transforming this mode of discourse into mere “moral fantasy,” thus possibly removing reflection from everyday, social concerns to a level where a firm enough connection to them is no longer sustained. The imaginative, on the other hand, is “imbued with sociocultural meanings and rooted in the problematic conditions.”<sup>376</sup>

The important point is that it is precisely the imaginative sense of imagination that Dewey thinks underpins aesthetic experience, Dewey, in fact, explicitly stating that “esthetic

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<sup>374</sup> Dewey (1980, 267). Italics Dewey.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid. (269).

<sup>376</sup> Fesmire (2003, 66).

experience is imaginative.”<sup>377</sup> The claim that in Dewey’s conception of aesthetic experience the imaginative has an important role does not merely rest on referring to this quotation. Observing the characteristic features Dewey believes this form of experience to possess also indicates this. That is, a kind of structured intensity which extends for a certain period of time, and which is demarcated from the stream of experiences surrounding it. It seems that for an experience to acquire these qualities requires an active contribution from the subject of experience which holds the different parts of the experience together and molds them into a structured unity. Given Dewey’s description of imagination as the making of old and familiar things new, it is arguable that Dewey would find the activity involved in this experience imagination. Moreover, it seems that there must be specific limits on how this underlying activity may function in aesthetic experience, for without some sort of boundaries, there would be nothing against which the experience could acquire the character that, in Dewey’s opinion, is typical of aesthetic experience. That is, without “elements of resistance,” as Dewey himself puts it, aesthetic experience could not possess the kind of intense, developmental structure, which Dewey regards it as possessing.<sup>378</sup>

The important upshot of this discussion is that it calls into question a view of imagination which connects its value to the freedom that has usually been considered its essential feature. That is, imagination becomes more productive the more freely it is allowed to fly. The reformulation of Rorty’s Postmetaphysical Critique seems to involve precisely this kind of assumption. If that indeed is the case, then the above account of Dewey’s imaginative sense of imagination and the way Fesmire appropriates it for his concerns may be used to undermine Rorty’s critique, for that account indicates that the value of imagination is by no means enhanced fewer the boundaries on its functioning are set. Rather, it seems that the structure of imagination implied by the role ascribed to it in interpretation in the intentionalist theory built upon Davidson’s ideas reveals some striking similarities with Dewey’s imaginative sense of imagination. The imaginative sense of imagination implies that aesthetic experience does not necessarily become more complex and intensive fewer the restrictions on imagination are set. Rather Dewey’s description of aesthetic experience as imaginative indicates the way in which constraints, in fact, serve as prerequisites for complexity and intensity. In other words, without some sorts of limits the experience could not possess the kind of unifying developmental character that both complexity and intensity seem to require.

Now, this description of aesthetic experience not only points to those factors that enable intentionalist theories of interpretation to accommodate Dewey’s aesthetic views within their approach, but also how that approach may ultimately account for the value attached to literature in Rorty’s postmetaphysical culture. Given the connection Dewey draws between the imaginative sense of imagination and aesthetic experience, engaging with one’s environment and artworks in a way that Dewey would regard as aesthetic becomes an

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<sup>377</sup> Dewey (1980, 272).

<sup>378</sup> Ibid. (262).

important source of developing those capacities proper moral reflection, in Fesmire's opinion, involves. This is because the realization of aesthetic experience requires an active contribution from the imagination of the subject of experience. Since the activity involved in the use of imagination of tying different elements into new unities is an important element in molding the structure of aesthetic experience into the kind of structured, unified, complexity Dewey thinks it possesses, environments which afford aesthetic experiences, as well as engagements with artworks which are marked by the characteristic features of Dewey's concept of aesthetic experience, are important means of triggering, sustaining, and ultimately refining our imaginative capacities.

At this point, it is important to observe that there are distinctive similarities between Dewey's description of the imaginative sense of imagination and the role imagination occupies in the Davidsonian intentionalism outlined above. In both cases, the core of imagination is understood in a similar way, that is, as a capacity to collect and compose individual things into a complex whole, and to build different relationships between the individual parts that make up the whole. In the Davidsonian intentionalism outlined above, imagination is, in other words, intended to aid interpretation in tying different elements into complex unities in a sense similar to the way imagination in its imaginative sense is meant to enlarge one's perception in the case of moral reflection. Given this structural overlap between these domains, Davidsonian intentionalism proves to be a fruitful approach in regard to those factors which make engagements with literary works important ways of developing imagination precisely in the imaginative sense. One can easily find from Dewey a description of an experience which corresponds to the structure that Davidson sees the interpretation of Joyce's works involves, as well as the experience that this sort of engagement gives rise to. For instance, Dewey maintains that "the spontaneity of art is not one of opposition to anything, but marks complete absorption in an *orderly* development. This absorption is characteristic of esthetic experience; but it is an ideal for all experience...."<sup>379</sup> Dewey considers that the experience he describes in this quotation possesses an orderly developing character. The form of imagination which holds the elements of the experience together and makes the absorption possible is imaginative in character. In this respect, Davidson's example of Joyce indicates that to follow intentionalist principles in interpretation does not inevitably minimize the role of the interpreter's imagination in interpretation. It also suggests that if it is indeed possible to cultivate one's imaginative capacities by engaging with one's environment and with artworks in a way regarded as aesthetic by Dewey, as Fesmire following Dewey assumes,<sup>380</sup> then intentionalist theories may even be argued to be better equipped to embrace those features in our interactions with artworks which make these encounters an important source for cultivating our capacity for moral reflection than the approach Rorty favors.

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid. (280). My italics.

<sup>380</sup> More on how Dewey considered imagination to contribute to the well-being of human life see Chamblis (1991).



Furthermore, Davidson's example of Joyce suggests that, in many cases, an approach to the artwork guided by an understanding of what the author meant serves as a precondition for the experience elicited by the work to acquire the unity and orderly developing character Dewey thinks aesthetic experience possesses. The different parts of the work are united into an organic unity by this understanding. Without the elements of resistance following from the author's intentions, as Dewey might put it in this context, the experience could lack unity and order, and would thus not be an aesthetic one, as this notion is defined by Dewey. A lack of understanding of the structure of the work may even hinder our imaginative engagement with it.

This investigation of the connections between Davidsonian intentionalism and the role of imagination in pragmatist approaches to ethics illuminates the problems involved in Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique of intentionalism. The fundamental point of Rorty's critique is that intentionalist theories of interpretation should be discarded because they are incapable of accounting for those features of literary works which make them important with regard to the social goals and values central to the postmetaphysical, liberal society Rorty outlines. A central element of my argument against Rorty's critique was the observation that the realization of those values Rorty's culture is founded on requires refining the same human capacities whose role in moral reflection Fesmire highlights. Now, if engagements with artworks are important means of developing the capacities which both Rorty and Fesmire value, and if the Davidsonian intentionalism formulated in this essay is able to give imagination a location in interpretation which ultimately proves profitable in regard to its refinement, then intentionalist theories are not as impoverished as Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique assumes. The theory of literary interpretation drawn on Davidson's views shows that an intentionalist approach to interpretation can, after all, embrace those factors of literary works which make them important for Rorty's liberal culture. Rorty's liberal ironist thus need not be a Bloomian interpreter who forsakes the author's intentions for her creative interpretive plays, and who sees the author's intentions only as obstacles for the full realization of the aesthetic potentials of the work under interpretation. There is no essential connection between holding a view of interpretation expressed in Rorty's writings on the liberal ironist and satisfying those demands Rorty sets for literature, for the intentionalist view of interpretation developed upon Davidson's views in this essay is able to meet them as well. For this reason, Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique of intentionalism fails.

In the next section, I shall illuminate with an example of my own the structure the use of imagination takes in interpretation in Davidsonian intentionalism. The case will lend further support for the view that it is precisely the imaginative sense of imagination singled out by Dewey which acquires an important position in Davidson's outlook on interpretation.

### *The Example: Leitmotifs in the First Act of Wagner's The Valkyrie*

If you are like me, that is, a person who has started to read Joyce's *Ulysses* on numerous occasions, but has given up the attempt of finishing it after the first ten pages or so, the sort of support I drew from Davidson's example of Joyce for my defense of intentionalism might not strike you as convincing. Let me therefore use another example with which to illuminate the role of imagination in interpretation, and the kind of position an intentionalist approach is able to reserve for it.

This is a musical example concerning the way in which the leitmotif technique developed by Richard Wagner functions in the first act of his music drama *The Valkyrie*. Roger Scruton's account of leitmotifs serves as a good touchstone for exploring the role of imagination in their interpretation and understanding. One of the primary goals of his analysis is to challenge the widespread assumption that leitmotifs are similar in character to other signs populating our environment in that they are primarily intended to refer to something which lies outside them. However, as Scruton points out, this understanding gives a highly impoverished account of their character which fails to embrace the full complexity of this musical device. Rather than seeing them on a par with words they should, in Scruton's opinion, be described as "musical magnet[s] around which meaning slowly accumulates," and which, ultimately, create an "expressive link between dramatic contexts, which compels the listener to bring one situation to bear on another, so that their atmospheres fuse."<sup>381</sup> In other words, leitmotifs are musical devices with a memory, so to speak, and by possessing this kind of quality they color events which are being carried out on stage at the time of their appearance with past events. This sort of structure, in turn, means that their understanding requires a substantial amount of imagination from the hearer. It requires that the listener is first of all capable of identifying the events and ideas the emerging leitmotif has been associated with before, and secondly, to grasp how the associations the leitmotif carries are intended to color the stage actions around it.

Although Wagner employs the leitmotif technique in a number of his operas, it is most commonly associated with Wagner's magnum opus, the tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Here, I have decided to illuminate features which are characteristic of leitmotifs through the first act of *The Valkyrie*, the second installment to Wagner's tetralogy. This is mainly because it forms an easily distinguishable whole.

Bryan Magee's description of the aesthetic character of *The Valkyrie*'s first act provides a good starting point for my account. Magee writes:

After the loveless world of *Rhinegold*, the emergence of the most basic and primal feeling of human love within a total order of things that had hitherto had no place for it is not just something that the first act of *The Valkyrie* depicts but something that it is. And this is

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<sup>381</sup> Scruton (1997, 136-137).

emotionally moving beyond anything previously imagined, including anything previously imagined by Wagner. This act is successful artistically in every way imaginable.... The characters, the action, the situation – all are triumphantly achieved, both dramatically and musically. [...] There remains, permanently, something mesmeric about it. Not only utterly abandoned love but the disconcerting emotional nakedness and vulnerability that go with it are uninhibitedly expressed. It is as if the living creatureliness of these emotional beings has been skinned: the intensity of their experience borders on the intolerable. It is the first time in Wagner's output that the most deeply protected and (in this case) forbidden emotions are given open voice, so that what reaches us in the audience is something that has never found expression in art.<sup>382</sup>

My reason for selecting this quotation is that it may be used to indicate how essential a role the leitmotifs have in the first act of *The Valkyrie*. It is my belief that only through an understanding of the leitmotif technique employed in the first act is it possible for the listener to grasp those aesthetic features Magee finds characteristic in that act. That is, if the hearer's experience were not guided by this understanding, she would miss much of what makes the act exceptional.

Two leitmotifs in particular have an important position in the first act of *The Valkyrie*, i.e., the Walhalla motif and the Notung motif. Both receive their initial appearances in *The Rhinegold*, the first opera of the tetralogy. Their importance for the act's identity is based on their capacity to bring past elements to the act. By doing so, these leitmotifs open up a new level in which the drama of the first act of *The Valkyrie* takes place. However, this level remains closed to a listener who does not grasp how the leitmotifs are intended to function in the act. Imagination comes into play in understanding the act, for it essentially consists of the capacity to grasp what past elements the leitmotifs bring to the act and how they situate the actions of the first act of *The Valkyrie* within the total structure of *The Ring*.

The level of drama that these two leitmotifs bring to the act is a theme of *The Ring* which Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht have named "Project Siegmund."<sup>383</sup> This is related to the puzzled situation that Wotan, the ruler of the gods, faces at the end of *The Rhinegold*. After having agreed with the giants Fafner and Fasolt to give up the gold, together with the ring Wotan has cunningly managed to snatch from Alberich, Wotan is left in a problematic situation regarding his attempt to establish order in the world. That he is not in possession of the ring by means of which its owner can rule the world poses a substantial threat to his authority. However, because Wotan's rule rests on a commitment to laws and contracts, he cannot simply steal the ring back from Fafner without undermining the foundations of his own authority. This is the dilemma that Wotan arrives at in the end of *The Rhinegold*.

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<sup>382</sup> Magee (2001, 132).

<sup>383</sup> Kitcher & Schacht (2004).

Here is where Project Siegmund enters the picture. At the end of the opera, Wotan is “seized by a great idea,” as the stage directions say, that he must in some way give rise to a hero who is able to get the ring back from Fafner, while simultaneously being free of his will. In other words, Project Siegmund is intended to solve the dilemma into which Wotan has drifted. It enables him, or so he thinks, to both sustain the status of those elements on which his authority rests, that is, rules and laws, and to get hold of the ring.

In between the end of *The Rhinegold* and the beginning of *The Valkyrie*, Wotan has two children Siegmund and Sieglinde with an earthly woman. One day their home is attacked by a group of brutes, who kill the siblings’ mother and kidnap Sieglinde. For a while after this incident, Wotan lives with Siegmund in the woods. Eventually, however, he leaves Siegmund to mature by himself in order for him to grow into the kind of hero who can resolve Wotan’s dilemma. That is, since Wotan believes that by abandoning Siegmund his son would be independent of his will and actions, Siegmund can return him the ring without in any way compromising the foundations of his authority.

The first act of *The Valkyrie* sees the initial stages of the project planned by Wotan. He has plunged a sword into the tree trunk around which the hut Hunding inhabits has been built, and where he now lives with his wife, Sieglinde, whom Hunding forced into marriage. With the help of this sword Siegmund should kill Fafner, who now, transformed into a dragon, guards his treasure.

Wotan’s Project Siegmund acquires a position in the first act of *The Valkyrie* precisely through the appearance of the above-mentioned leitmotifs. The past elements which they bring to the act derive from the contexts in which they initially appeared in *The Rhinegold*. The Walhalla motif receives its first appearance at the beginning of the second scene of *The Rhinegold*, accompanying Wotan’s welcome to his newly-built fortress, while The Notung motif, in turn, appears for the first time at the end of *The Rhinegold*, precisely at the point where Wotan is seized by his great idea. In this respect, this motif does not merely serve as a signifier for the sword, but its sense, ultimately, covers the whole master plan in which that sword has a role, i.e., Project Siegmund.

In each appearance these leitmotifs bring with them elements from the past, and by doing so, ultimately connect the course of events of the first act of *The Valkyrie* to the whole of *The Ring*. The episode in which the magnetic character of these leitmotifs has the most profound effect is the love relationship which gradually develops between the siblings during the course of the act. Magee characterizes that relationship as involving an “emotional nakedness” and “vulnerability.” In my view, the fact that the act possesses these qualities is dependent on how the leitmotifs function in the act, that is, on the kind of light they cast over the drama.

While it seems to be the case that each leitmotif possesses a magnetic character to at least some degree, some appearances are more strongly magnetic than others. In my view five leitmotif appearances in the first act of *The Valkyrie* in particular possess an intensely magnetic character. The first appearance of relevance is the Walhalla motif, which is heard

for the first time immediately after Siegmund has finished a story about his past which he has told to Sieglinde and Hunding. The reason why this appearance is of special relevance is that it appears at a point in the story where Siegmund tells that after having gone into battle with his father, he could no longer find him again, the leitmotif thus indicating the connection between Wotan and Siegmund.

The second motif to appear, in turn, connects Sieglinde to the ultimate scheme of things. In this case, it is the Notung Motif played by the trumpet, which is heard when Sieglinde casts a glance at the tree trunk where Wotan had plunged the sword, the appearance in this context thus perhaps also indicating Sieglinde's craving to be freed from her unhappy condition.

Significantly, as the drama of the first act of *The Valkyrie* begins to develop, the leitmotifs gradually acquire a more essential position in the act. That is, to use Scruton's description, more meanings and associations slowly begin to accumulate around them, their magnetic character simultaneously becoming more complex.

An illuminating example of how leitmotifs contribute to this development where different dramatic contexts fuse is provided by the third leitmotif appearance which I find to be of relevance. This is the scene where Siegmund has been left alone, after having been challenged by Hunding to a duel to be carried out in the morning. At this point in Siegmund's lines a reference is made to his father, Siegmund suddenly remembering that his father promised him a sword during his deepest distress. Siegmund now finds himself in such a situation. However, no sword appears to be in sight. At this point, Siegmund screams "Wälse" (Wotan's mortal name), almost as if he would be cursing his father. These screams and Siegmund's irritated question "wo ist dein Schwert" is followed by an orchestral climax at the height of which the Notung motif is heard played by the trumpet.

In this context, the magnetic character of the Notung motif begins to evolve, that is, it does not merely serve the purpose of signifying that there is a sword somewhere on stage, but through this reappearance and the memory the leitmotif possesses the elements of Project Siegmund begin to color the actions of the first act of *The Valkyrie* more strongly. The leitmotif opens another level for the drama, so to speak. In particular, through the associations which link the Notung motif with Project Siegmund the appearance of the Notung leitmotif in this context suggests that Wälse/Wotan did not sink the sword in the tree primarily to help Siegmund's rescue, as he thinks, but on account of the task Wotan has planned for Siegmund which Siegmund is, of course, totally unaware of. Through this particular interplay between different elements, the full complexity of the act starts to reveal itself. That is, it gradually becomes apparent that the factors which are involved in constituting the identity of the act do not merely consist of what is immediately present on stage and is audible in the music, but it is based on how immediately present elements interplay with those elements that the leitmotifs bring to the act, that is, how the dramatic contexts associated with the leitmotifs and what is currently acted out on stage fuse.

The fourth appearance I find to be of importance is particularly effective. It occurs in Sieglinde's recital following Siegmund's lamentation. In this case, the motifs vital for this act, i.e., Walhalla and Notung, appear immediately after each other. Both are connected to the figure of Wotan and to his plans. In her story, Sieglinde tells about a strange incident that happened at her wedding. All of a sudden the festivities were interrupted by a strange man wearing a brimmed hat and an eye patch. This stranger struck a sword into the tree around which Hunding's hut is built, declaring that the sword would belong to anyone who could pull it out. Sieglinde tells that she immediately recognized from the look the strange man gave her that he was, in fact, her father, and that the sword was intended for the hero who would rescue her.

Now, although these motifs do establish a relationship primarily to Wotan, the way in which they interplay with each other, as well as with present stage actions, a host of relationships are opened up. That is, while the reappearance of the Walhalla motif does indeed indicate that Sieglinde and Siegmund have the same father, since the same theme appears in Sieglinde's story as in Siegmund's, it is, rather, Wotan's Project Siegmund which begins to occupy an even more essential position in the act through these appearances. The interplay between the level opened up by the leitmotifs and the one currently acted out on stage no longer involves a relationship between Wotan's plans and Siegmund, for now the character of Sieglinde becomes part of this web as well. The interaction between these two levels of drama especially affects the character that the gradually developing love relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde begins to acquire. Magee's description of the first act of *The Valkyrie* contains an insightful description of the features it involves. In the love of Siegmund and Sieglinde, the audience truly witnesses "the emergence of the most basic and primal feeling of human love within a total order of things," which expresses an unparalleled "emotional nakedness and vulnerability."

Now, to my mind, the fact that the first act of *The Valkyrie* possesses these characteristic features is based on the way in which the levels of meaning delivered by the leitmotifs color the relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde. That is, the vulnerable character of their love emerges once the relationship between the siblings is immersed in the "total order of things," a stance that allows the melancholy helplessness characteristic of their relationship to properly unfold. In other words, their relationship exhibits a specific helplessness not only because their respective situations at the beginning of the act are as miserable as they are, but also because those means that enable their salvation, and which they now think will make the flourishing of their love possible, are not really intended for those purposes they think they are, but for some ulterior motives of which Siegmund and Sieglinde are both totally ignorant. The feeling of vulnerability their relationship elicits in the viewer is enhanced by their ignorance of the true state of affairs. Now, because the leitmotifs provide the listener with an insight into those elements of which the siblings are both unaware, the particular complexity their love acquires is a result of these leitmotifs.

The magnetic character of leitmotifs is at its most effective in the scene where the siblings gaze at each other's features. This is the fifth leitmotif I find to be of relevance. Sieglinde is struck by the fact that Siegmund's appearance brings something to her mind – "though I first saw you today, I've set eyes on you before." This amazement between the two is accompanied by both motifs which have been examined above. Gradually, Siegmund and Sieglinde begin to fall in love with each other. However, this developing relationship arouses complex, even mixed feelings in the spectator, and this is precisely because she knows more than they do. The leitmotifs convey that the siblings have the same father, their relationship thus being a form of incest, and that even though the sword may make Sieglinde's rescue possible, it really is not meant for the purpose the siblings think.

In these respects, the leitmotifs reveal the accidental nature of the love between Sieglinde and Siegmund. This is because the associations which they bring to the act suggest that their love is ultimately something which should not be happening, not only because the relationship is a form of incest, but because it is not part of Wotan's master plan. Siegmund and Sieglinde aren't free beings at all, but, in a certain sense, only puppets in Wotan's scheme to gain possession of the ring. It is precisely this kind of outlook on their relationship that the level opened up by the leitmotifs provides, and because that kind of understanding brings various new elements to the experience the act elicits, that experience would be significantly less complex if the hearer's engagement with the act were not guided by a proper understanding of how the leitmotifs I have picked out are intended to function in the act. Without a proper grasp of the way in which the leitmotif technique functions in the first act of *The Valkyrie*, the experience could not develop in relation to those qualities Magee believes characterize the act. That is, even though the tonally moving forms which the act contains make up a striking piece of music in their own right, the experience would, nevertheless, be much simpler in the case where the engagement with the act is not guided by an understanding of how meaning accumulates around the leitmotifs as the act proceeds. So, perhaps Mark Twain was, after all, right when he claimed that Wagner's music is "better than it sounds."

### *The Role of Imagination in Understanding the First Act of The Valkyrie*

So, what relevance could such a bizarre piece of music as Wagner's *The Ring*, filled with gods, dwarfs, and immature heroes, have for such down to earth issues as Rorty's postmetaphysical culture and pragmatist ethics. Anyone with only a superficial knowledge of Wagner's texts knows that postmetaphysicality is an ill-suited epithet to describe their tone. My reason for taking up this example does not, however, so much relate to the actual plot of *The Ring* as to the leitmotif technique Wagner employs in the tetralogy. The discussion of the first act of *The Valkyrie* shows that its understanding rests in a capacity to grasp how the

appearance of a given leitmotif is intended to color those stage actions during which it occurs. That this is central to the understanding of the act indicates the way in which imagination acquires an important role in its fuller comprehension. That is, imagination is precisely the faculty which picks out and unites the different elements which make up that coloring and grasps the way the different dramatic contexts fuse together.

Now, what is of special relevance is that the character the use of imagination takes in the case of the first act of *Valkyrie* shares some crucial elements with the form of imagination Dewey regards as imaginative. Unlike in imaginary exercises of imagination where “the mind stays aloof and toys with material rather than boldly grasping it,”<sup>384</sup> as Dewey at one point describes the imaginary sense of imagination, an engagement guided by an appropriate understanding of the leitmotif technique gives the engagement a structure which involves features similar to those which Dewey considers characterize the imaginative. That is, the ideas, plans, and characters associated with a particular leitmotif, as well as how a leitmotif is intended to function in the context where it appears, creates a demarcated space for imagination to function, imagination thus being unable to run as freely as it is allowed in the imaginary sense. The past elements delivered by the leitmotifs provide the elements of resistance which Dewey finds essential for imaginative forms of imagination. Only by being guided by the imaginative sense of imagination does the experience of the first act of *The Valkyrie* achieve the kind of intensity, unity and complexity that, in Dewey’s opinion, is typical of aesthetic experience.

The fact that the imaginative form of imagination has an essential role in understanding leitmotifs indicates the reasons why this sort of engagement could prove a fruitful way of developing those capacities Fesmire sees proper moral reflection to require. Fesmire in one place formulates the core of that reflection as the capacity to see “the near in terms of the remote.”<sup>385</sup> Fesmire’s description of one of the essential features of moral reflection brings out the connection which I believe to obtain between the capacities that that form of discourse requires on the one hand and the conditions of understanding leitmotifs on the other. The leitmotifs deliver elements from the past to color those events acted out on stage during their appearance, their magnetic character thus requiring an enlarging of perception from the hearer similar to the sense in which imagination is intended to enlarge one’s resources for moral reflection. Now, if through learning to engage with the first act of *The Valkyrie* with the kind of understanding outlined above, which assuredly is not an easy task, one is able to cultivate those abilities which moral reflection also involves, then this example serves to further indicate the way engagements with art and aesthetic experience can develop people’s capacity to engage in moral situations.

Above, it was emphasized that Fesmire’s approach to ethics which highlights the vital role of imagination in moral reflection, and Rorty’s narrative postmetaphysical approach overlap

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<sup>384</sup> Dewey (1980, 268).

<sup>385</sup> Fesmire (2003, 76).



in significant ways. In particular, Fesmire's account of what proper moral reflection requires draws attention to capacities similar to those that Rorty wishes literature and literary theory dominated by the liberal ironic attitude should provide for the inhabitants of his postmetaphysical culture. That literature, and why not art in general, holds this sort of position in Rorty's liberal culture forms the core of Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique, i.e., assessing the strength of a theory of interpretation should be based on how it is able to meet those challenges Rorty outlines for literature in his postmetaphysical culture.

Now, given the similarities between Rorty's and Fesmire's approaches to ethics, the above account of *The Valkyrie* should also be found a fruitful one concerning the sort of postmetaphysical terms Rorty outlines. However, the fact that it manages to evolve into such an example reveals problems in Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique. This is because the approach to the first act of *The Valkyrie* above by no means embodies the kind of attitude that Rorty finds typical for the liberal ironist's method of approaching art. That is, the outlook on the leitmotif technique provided above does not call for an abolishment of Wagner's intentions, for the outlook is, in fact, highly compatible with intentionalist principles. The sort of role which is attributed to leitmotifs in the first act of *The Valkyrie* by the above account, by and large corresponds to the way in which I believe Wagner intended that technique to be understood.

Support for this view may yet again be found in Scruton's approach to leitmotifs. In his opinion, their magnetic character is not the only feature they possess which serves to set leitmotifs apart from words. Another factor separating the two is the different role conventions play in the conditions of their understanding. That is, Scruton argues that while words acquire their meanings as a result of the roles they occupy in our convention-governed linguistic practices, this is not the case with leitmotifs.<sup>386</sup> Rather, the conditions that Scruton considers the understanding of leitmotifs involve draws attention to factors similar to those that were highlighted in Davidson's example of Joyce. That is, like Joyce, Wagner too may be said to "draw on every resource his readers command (or that he hopes they command, or thinks they should command)," understanding thus requiring in both cases an ability to grasp how those resources the author is drawing on are intended to function in the context in which the author utilizes them anew. In the case of leitmotifs, this requires a grasp of what past events the leitmotif delivers to the present and how that motif colors those events which are currently acted on stage. Now, I cannot see how an acquaintance with the relevant conventions, whatever in this case they might be, could have a significant role to play in this process, that is, in the hearer's coming to an understanding of the role which a given leitmotif is intended to play in a given context. Rather, in many respects that activity resembles Davidson's description of communication as the interplay between passing and prior theories and the particular reflexive interaction it was seen to involve.

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<sup>386</sup> Scruton (2003, 150).

The second important similarity between the account of the first act of *The Valkyrie* offered by me and Davidson's reading of Joyce is that they both suggest that an approach to artworks which stays faithful to the author's intentions in no way diminishes the role played by imagination in that process. Rather, as the case of the first act of *The Valkyrie* indicates, sometimes it is only through an understanding of the author's intentions that the work's full complexity reveals itself. In this kind of case "the center of creative energy" is "moved from the artist to a point between the writer and his audience," as was the case with Joyce's prose in Davidson's opinion. That imagination can acquire an important position in an approach to art which is guided by intentionalist principles was taken to imply that that approach can also accommodate Dewey's understanding of aesthetic experience within it. We have now received further support for this assumption. To engage with the first act of *The Valkyrie* with an understanding of how the leitmotif technique functions in it elicits an experience in the viewer which corresponds to Dewey's description of aesthetic experience. That is, "we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences."<sup>387</sup> In other words, the reappearance of certain leitmotifs the hearer already recognizes from *The Rhinegold* raises the question regarding their purpose in the first act of *The Valkyrie* and what effect they are intended to have on the act, if any. Only after the hearer has achieved a sufficient answer to these questions does her listening experience acquire the kind of complex fulfillment which Dewey considers an essential feature of aesthetic experience.

Given that the above account of *The Valkyrie* both manages to embrace those features of our engagements with art that Rorty values and is also simultaneously faithful to intentionalist principles, it suffices to show problems in Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique. That criticism essentially consisted of an insistence that intentionalist approaches cannot meet those challenges Rorty's postmetaphysical culture sets for literature, and that if one acknowledges the actuality of that challenge, one should discard intentionalist forms of interpretation. However, since the upshot of the previous discussion on imagination's role in ethics and the possible contribution engagements with artworks may have on our capacity to engage in moral reflection is precisely that intentionalist theories can, ultimately, account for the factors that make literary works important for Rorty's postmetaphysical culture, Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique fails.

Yet, while providing a novel defense of intentionalism, this conclusion might still not appear that substantial. This is because it basically just establishes that intentionalism can meet a challenge Rorty poses for it, but this still does not provide sufficient grounds for favoring that view of interpretation over the account Rorty supports. This conclusion thus does not manage to acquire the kind of strength the general aims of this thesis require.

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<sup>387</sup> Dewey (1980, 35).

However, the ability of Davidsonian intentionalism to successfully account for the position that Rorty sets for literature has some substantial effects on the status of Rorty's own pragmatist approach to interpretation. That this is so becomes apparent by recalling the way in which Rorty draws support for his postmetaphysical approach to literature. That approach raised the specter of relativism, a specter which has continuously lurked behind Rorty's views. It was argued that, at least in the context of interpretation, Rorty could overcome the problem of relativism by insisting on the need to reconsider the terms with which the adequacy of theories of interpretation is to be assessed. That is, the way in which a theory manages to provide resources for accommodating those elements Rorty's postmetaphysical approach to literature requires outweighs how it manages to cope with the problem of relativism.

Now, what I take this form of argument to imply, together with the fact that an intentionalist theory of interpretation is able to meet the challenge arising from Rorty's postmetaphysical ambitions, is that any problems that Rorty's views may now be seen to face, but which a form of intentionalism is able to overcome, provides reasons for supporting an intentionalist approach to interpretation over Rorty's pragmatist theory. In other words, if an intentionalist theory is able to meet Rorty's Postmetaphysical Critique, as well as overcome certain problems Rorty's own pragmatist theory encounters, the strength of Rorty's pragmatist theory is severely undermined. This is because in that kind of case it is in danger of becoming a recommendation which can be discarded without losing anything particular. In the next section, I shall draw attention to an issue which I believe intentionalist theories have no problems in accommodating, but which raises problems for the kind of view of interpretation Rorty supports. After that, I shall present the conclusions of this chapter.

## ***5. The Conditions of Solidarity and the Ethics of Interpretation***

There is another discussion located in the intersection of ethics and aesthetics in relation to which the strength of Rorty's interpretive position may be assessed. As noted, Rorty's approach to literature may be seen as part of the tradition in ethics which explores the ways in which literary works can function as modes of moral investigation. While this has been the primary question with regard to which the relationship between ethics and aesthetics has been considered, there is another issue in which that very same relationship comes into play as well.

In this case, moral questions are extended to concern an issue which is of the utmost importance for this study as a whole, i.e., the nature of valid interpretation. This discussion has provided a deeper insight into what the assessment of validity involves. It has been argued that interpretations should be constrained by the author's intentions not only because they

determine what the work means, but because we have a particular kind of moral responsibility to approach artworks in a way that takes them into account.<sup>388</sup>

Now, the description of Rorty's theory given in this chapter suggests that the respective ethical questions concerning the position of literature in Rorty's postmetaphysical culture and the nature of valid interpretation not only meet in Rorty's views in an interesting way but that they, in fact, appear to be irreconcilable. For Rorty's pragmatist account of interpretation, which is meant to establish his specific approach to literature, runs noticeably counter to recent accounts that see moral considerations as restricting the scope of valid approaches to works of art. The moral considerations these views raise are aimed precisely against the sort of account of interpretation Rorty supports.

The importance of moral considerations for interpretation is drawn from a particular conception regarding the construction of an artist's identity. According to this view her identity is not separable from her artistic activity and the character of her works, but it is, in fact, expressed through them. In other words, the themes a given artist has decided to consider in her works, the way she approaches them, together with the way in which her works relate to the history of art, all contribute to the formation of her identity, i.e., what kind of an artist and, eventually, what kind of a person she is. This sort of connection means that when we encounter an artwork, we are reflecting on an object that is tightly connected to its creator's identity. Because of this, it is argued that it is morally reprehensible to approach artworks in any way we please.<sup>389</sup>

Since Rorty explicitly states that the pragmatist-oriented interpreter does not care about the author's intentions, but only about what he can get out of the work at hand, his theory of interpretation is clearly in risk of violating those moral principles that have been seen to hold an important position in interpretive activity. Thus, if one accepts the primacy of these principles, one should reject Rorty's theory. However, the issue is not as straightforward as this. For the problem with the present formulations is that almost all of them are underpinned by a Kantian normative view of ethics, that is, an approach to moral issues whose very foundations Rorty seeks to undermine. This background is most explicitly present in E.D. Hirsch's views, for he thinks that the interpreter should be guided by "a fundamental ethical maxim," according to which the interpreter has a "basic moral imperative... to respect an author's intention."<sup>390</sup> As Hirsch notes, this formulation maintains the spirit of Kant's categorical imperative.<sup>391</sup> However, because of Rorty's skeptical attitude towards Kantian moral philosophy, it would seem to bias the case against Rorty to rely on principles derived from it in this specific context. Yet, a question worth considering is whether the values on

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<sup>388</sup> See especially, Hirsch (1976), Haapala (1999, 2003), Irwin (1999). I believe that Danto's notion of deep interpretation can also be seen to entail moral considerations for interpretation (Danto 1986). See especially Danto's brief discussion of deep interpretation in Danto (1993, 201-203).

<sup>389</sup> See especially, Haapala (1999, 172-173).

<sup>390</sup> Hirsch (1976, 90-92).

<sup>391</sup> Haapala (1999, 2003) also acknowledges the Kantian background of his views.

which Rorty's liberal society is founded, in fact, entail moral principles for interpretation. If they do, and if Rorty's theory of interpretation is in conflict with them, its ultimate validity must be reassessed.

Rorty, in fact, develops his idea of solidarity as the foundation of a liberal culture in direct confrontation with the main tenets of Kant's moral philosophy. Rorty's main point against Kant is that moral judgments need not make a claim to universal validity in the way Kant maintains. That is, beliefs can still regulate action and be "thought worth dying for" even if it is acknowledged that they are "caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstances."<sup>392</sup> Rorty argues that although one possesses a skeptical attitude towards the existence of a common human nature, this does not, in his opinion, remove the fact that we have a particular kind of "moral obligation to feel a sense of solidarity with all other human beings."<sup>393</sup> This is an important principle for Rorty in particular, because the liberal society outlined by him rests on its wide-ranging recognition.

The significant position of solidarity, in turn, entails that certain maxims and values should guide the attitudes with which the members of a liberal society relate to their fellow inhabitants. Thus, while Rorty's liberalism is not established in such universalist terms, in which the strength of certain principles is explained in terms of a relationship to a common human nature people share, it must still endorse particular principles as more acceptable and desirable than others. To assess values in these terms, actually, goes well with the philosophical holism that different parts of Rorty's work involve. According to this kind of holism theories and belief systems do not contain foundational bedrock premises, but certain beliefs are considered more crucial than others, because they inhabit a more essential position in the total web of beliefs. That is, in the case of Rorty's liberalism, those values which constitute the idea of liberalism such as, say, various forms freedom, the possibility for self-development, and openmindedness, should be considered superior to less crucial and constitutive principles, which are located farther away from the core.<sup>394</sup> The former sorts of values are primary in the sense that they cannot be eradicated without destroying the very idea of liberalism.

As we saw, Rorty raises a person he calls "the liberal ironist" to an important position in his liberal culture, defining him or her as an individual "who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires...."<sup>395</sup> Such a person does not justify her actions by relating them to ahistorical, universal or theological principles. This type of person, thus, embodies those values which are important for Rorty's liberalism. Rorty also sketches an active role for the liberal ironist, and as became apparent he regards "literary critic" to be

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<sup>392</sup> Rorty (1989, 189).

<sup>393</sup> Ibid. (190).

<sup>394</sup> Ibid. (51-52).

<sup>395</sup> Ibid. (xv).

an alternative name for this type of person. This connection he draws is not surprising, for redescrptions inhabit a similar position in their respective activities.

However, once approached through the short account of liberalism given above, the ideality of the liberal ironist and the pragmatist critic turns out to be a more complex matter than Rorty seems to realize. The ironist seeks to create new descriptions in order to free those around her from old prejudices and outworn conceptions that she finds pose obstacles for the functioning of her community. While this kind of process should be considered valuable, it seems that redescriptive activities cannot in fact be carried out as unconditionally as this positive description concerning their role may imply. For when all the possible outcomes of this activity are drawn Rorty's trust in the power of redescription becomes, as Jean Bethke Elhstain also maintains, a "genuinely troubling [claim] – ethically and politically."<sup>396</sup> Although Rorty wishes to create an arena for the activity of the ironist and the literary critic which is as unbounded as possible, the creation of new descriptions must, ultimately, have certain boundaries, because, otherwise, the very foundations of Rorty's liberal society are, in fact, in danger of being destroyed. For this very reason, Rorty, too, must accept that interpretations should have particular constraints.

The holistic way in which Rorty's liberalism is grounded implies that such a course of action must be found deplorable when its outcomes can obstruct the realization of its central values. Now, the problem faced by Rorty is that the loose methods given to the liberal ironist and the pragmatist-minded literary critic for achieving their goals, i.e., redescrptions, are, in fact, in danger of turning their vocation into such an activity. Rorty overlooks the possibility that certain redescrptions and approaches can ultimately lead to unjustifiable humiliation and subjection. If redescription truly is the kind of powerful medium Rorty maintains, these sorts of negative outcomes are possible. Redescrptions may not only lead to an awareness of unnoticed similarities, they can be a powerful tool for pursuing completely opposite goals as well. Processes, which have these outcomes, do not enhance solidarity, but, rather, shrink the breeding ground of solidarity. Thus, Rorty's liberal culture must reject the very doctrine that makes these sorts of redescrptions possible. In other words, if a particular process of redescrbing is in conflict with the high value that a liberal society attaches, say, to various forms of freedom, not only must the description itself be rejected, but also the very scheme on which the justification of the process is grounded. Given the lack of restrictions which Rorty's pragmatist theory of interpretation provides for the literary critic, it may possibly turn out to be precisely such a scheme.

Rorty maintains that "all we can do is to work with the final vocabulary we have, while keeping our ears open for hints about how it might be expanded or revised."<sup>397</sup> However, this principle alone implies that certain ways of redescrbing cannot be accepted, for our ears are not properly open if we choose to describe a person's actions and its outcomes in terms that

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<sup>396</sup> Elhstain (2003, 146).

<sup>397</sup> Rorty (1989, 197).

distort them too much. The importance of lending an ear follows from one of the central values of Rorty's liberal society, the freedom to be heard. While redescription can be a source of freedom and discovery of important, unnoticed similarities, it can also be a powerful medium for suppression, and, hence, a possible source for the obstruction of those values found central by Rorty. Therefore, the very foundations of liberal culture entail that Rorty must ultimately accept certain boundaries for any type of redescribing activity, including interpretation.

Now, to get back to the issue of interpretation more specifically, if Rorty's pragmatist theory of interpretation truly provides the literary critic with such unrestrained tools for approaching literary works as is expressed in his writings on interpretation, it seems to ultimately run counter to Rorty's idea of liberalism, this incompatibility thus providing strong grounds for rejecting Rorty's account of interpretation. However, the more interesting implication of the previous discussion is that to see moral concerns as constraining the assessment of validity of interpretations need not be formulated in terms of Kantian moral philosophy, as they currently are, but the claim can be established on principles whose force Rorty must, in the end, accept as well. Not only does it follow from Kant's account of personhood that it is morally reprehensible to subject the artist's work to "our whimsies" or to treat the specific creation only as a means for satisfying our purposes and desires,<sup>398</sup> but the importance of this position also follows from Rorty's account of liberalism. Yet, this conclusion precisely means that the ultimate validity of Rorty's pragmatist account of interpretation must be reassessed even on Rorty's own terms.

## **6. Conclusions**

Now, if it indeed is the case that Rorty's approach to interpretation is incompatible with the idea that interpretations should be constrained by the sorts of moral considerations specified above, we have finally arrived at a conclusion which provides support for favoring an intentionalist approach over the kind of view of interpretation Rorty's pragmatism involves. That is, if one acknowledges that the discussion revolving around the ethics of interpretation raises factors which should be taken into account when considering the validity of interpretations, and this is something Rorty was shown to be compelled to concede to as well, then intentionalist theories begin to look the stronger position on interpretation of the two. This is because they are able to accommodate the factors which are seen to pose restrictions on interpretation in that discussion much more effortlessly than the view of interpretation involved in Rorty's sketch of the liberal ironist.

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<sup>398</sup> Hirsch (1976, 90-92), Haapala (1999, 172).

Rorty initially drew support for his theory by insisting that the strength of theories of interpretation should not be assessed on the basis of how they manage to track the ultimate structure of reality, but rather, whether they give ample resources for meeting those challenges that literature and literary theory face in Rorty's postmetaphysical society. The reading of Davidson's views implied that Rorty's pragmatist theory of interpretation is no better equipped to meet them than an intentionalist one, but that such an approach can ultimately account for the features which make literary works important for the postmetaphysical culture sketched by Rorty. So, after a successful reply to this criticism, which I dubbed *The Postmetaphysical Critique*, intentionalism managed to overcome a severe obstacle. Yet, the question which of the theories should be favored over the other remained. After the previous discussion of the ethical considerations related to interpretation the situation is no longer so, and the intentionalist has finally won game, set, and match. This is because while Rorty is compelled to accept that interpretations should be constrained by such factors as those raised above, of the two approaches only the one stressing the importance of the author's intentions is able to embrace them.

In his essay "Solidarity or Objectivity?," Rorty formulates the attitude which, in his opinion, should guide people and societies as follows:

If we could ever be moved solely by the desire for solidarity, setting aside the desire for objectivity altogether, then we should think of human progress as making it possible for human beings to do more interesting things and be more interesting people, not as heading towards a place which has somehow been prepared for humanity in advance.<sup>399</sup>

That intentionalist theories of interpretation are capable of accounting for Rorty's postmetaphysical approach to ethics and the kind of position the enhancement of solidarity occupies in it implies that, at least in the context of interpretation, there isn't any kind of incongruence between the goal Rorty wants us to pursue and the goal he wants us to give up. That is, we can keep our desire for objectivity, at least as this attitude is expressed in intentionalism, without this in any way compromising the conditions for enhancing the feeling of solidarity.

One of the features that separate Rorty's way of practicing philosophy from some traditional ways is its insistence on reconsidering those terms with which philosophical views may be challenged. Rorty emphasizes that besides traditional reliance on revealing logical inconsistencies in one's opponent's arguments and presenting knockdown counterexamples against them, one may also support one's own views by trying to make the claim one is opposing "look bad." In this chapter, I hope to have managed to put Rorty's theory in just that kind of light. If I have succeeded in this, Rorty's theory is then, yet again, undermined on its own terms as well.

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<sup>399</sup> Rorty (1991, 27-28).



## V Conclusions: How to be a Pluralist without Being a Relativist?

Parts of contemporary philosophy have been characterized by an attempt to go “beyond objectivism and relativism,” to borrow the title of Richard Bernstein’s book, which is one of the most systematic investigations of the factors motivating this attempt, as well as of the direction towards which it strives to steer philosophical reflection.<sup>400</sup> In Bernstein’s view, some philosophers among whom he includes, for example, both Gadamer and Rorty, have tried to formulate an approach to inquiry in which rejecting the idea of foundationalism as the requirement of meaningful discourse does not imply the impossibility of building a foundation for assessing the comparative strength of competing values and conceptions. Commitment to the view that there is no privileged viewpoint on the world does not, in other words, imply that one is compelled to regard any viewpoint as good as any other.

The attempt to formulate an approach to inquiry which is not dominated by the dualism of foundationalism and relativism is connected with the strand in contemporary philosophy which insists on the need to give relativism a new hearing. As noted in the introduction, support for granting relativism this kind of opportunity is drawn from the assumption that an attitude dominated by some form of foundationalism is no longer a compelling stance to have on the world, given the fractured nature of our contemporary condition, populated by seemingly irresolvable conflicts. The problem has been how to balance between these two ends, that is, how does one do justice to the plurality of world views, cultures, and religions our world contains, and which we are becoming increasingly aware of, without falling to the view that comparative judgments could not be made between the values and conceptions they embody.

This study as a whole acknowledges the importance of those factors which have served as a motivation for philosophers, such as Bernstein, to formulate an approach to inquiry in which relinquishing the idea of a privileged viewpoint on the world does not imply slipping into undesirable relativism. All of the three figures whose views I have focused on in this study (Margolis, Gadamer, and Rorty) may be seen to have made significant contributions to this development. I have acknowledged the importance of those factors lying in the background of the work of these three major figures of contemporary philosophy. However, as I noted in the

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<sup>400</sup> Bernstein (1991/1983).

introduction, another claim this study as a whole tries to defend is that a philosophical account of interpretation can embrace these factors without committing itself to the kind of view of interpretation these three philosophers support. Having now reached the end of my study I think we are in a position to achieve a more detailed picture of why the approach to interpretation developed in this study manages to evolve into such an account.

The way in which this study is connected to the line of thinking whose essential features Bernstein tries to track in his work may be indicated by an observation made by E.D. Hirsch. In the midst of his criticism of Gadamer, Hirsch remarks that the disagreement between him and Gadamer should not really be seen to concern the more general motivations lying behind Gadamer's hermeneutics, the core of which Hirsch sums up as an insistence that "a vital, contemporary understanding of the past is the only understanding worth having." Rather, what is at stake in their disagreement is the question what sorts of theoretical commitments does one need to hold so that one is able to accommodate that kind of attitude within one's approach to interpretation and understanding. By relying on the distinction between meaning and significance, Hirsch thinks that it is possible to explain certain kinds of phenomena, such as the fact that our relationship to past events and artworks can undergo significant transformations, without committing oneself to the account of understanding and interpretation Gadamer's hermeneutics involves, and to the "logical inconsistencies" which, in Hirsch's opinion, it ultimately falls into.<sup>401</sup>

Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance allows one to embrace the kind of pluralistic attitude the three philosophers mentioned above have found vital in our contemporary world. It does this because it reveals the possibility that two claims are not necessarily as opposed to each other as might initially seem to be the case, the opposition apparent in these conceptions, thus, not being in need of resolution either. On closer inspection, it might in fact turn out that from two claims made about a given artwork one concerns its meaning, while the other seeks to illuminate the work's significance. To accommodate Hirsch's distinction within one's approach to interpretation, in other words, allows one to embrace the kind of pluralistic attitude resisting the possibility of closure in inquiry the group of philosophers mentioned above have found significant for our contemporary condition. Indeed, as was noted in chapter three, significance is essentially boundless for Hirsch, changing as different kinds of relationships to the meaning of the work are formed. In chapter three, I argued with the help of the investigation of the case of Thomas Ad  s' *America: A Prophecy* offered there that the distinction vital for Hirsch's literary theory is much more warranted than some hermeneutic criticisms have presumed. As a result, Hirsch's claim concerning the neglect of the distinction between meaning and significance as the source of enormous confusion within Gadamer's hermeneutics seems, after all, accurate.

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<sup>401</sup> Hirsch (1967, 255).

Interestingly, certain critical remarks Davidson has addressed to Gadamer's views suggest that he believes them to be plagued by drawbacks similar to those Hirsch tries to uncover in Gadamer's work with the help of his distinction. While discussing Gadamer's views, Davidson remarks in the somewhat hazy and apparently offhand manner so typical of his writings as a whole that "should we then agree with Gadamer when he says that what the text means changes as the audience changes: 'A text is understood only if it is understood in a different way every time?'" Davidson replies, "I think not," then continues, "there are incompatible interpretations, as Freud suggests, because there is no reason to say that one rules out others.... It is true that every person, every age, every culture will make what it can of a text; and persons, periods, and cultures differ. But how can a significant relativism follow from a truism?"<sup>402</sup>

The answer Hirsch's analysis of the distinction between meaning and significance implies to this question posed by Davidson is that we can avoid the conclusion by simply paying more attention to what we are actually doing. That is, there is no reason to say that a claim made about an artwork rules out another one, since it might be the case that the claims have different objects. In this respect, assessing the validity of individual claims about artworks, as well as how they relate to each other requires that we are clear on, whether a given claim is intended to reveal the meaning of the work, or whether it is intended to illuminate the possible significance the work in question may have for us. These two activities do not stand in any kind of opposition with one another. Therefore, the distinction between meaning and significance gives a possibility for holding on to the view that the author's intentions do, indeed, pose the kinds of constraints on interpretation both Hirsch and Davidson think they do, while simultaneously embracing the view that artworks are also entities which contain aspects resisting closure.

The critical account of Rorty's pragmatist view of interpretation and of the position sketched for literature in Rorty's work presented in chapter four points to another way of uniting pluralism with a more robust view of justification than the relativistic position involves. In this case, the possibility for this kind of unification does not so much follow from the possible significance that may be drawn from a given artwork, as to the productive consequences which the interpretation process itself may engender. For example, in chapter four I tried to illuminate one possible structure the process of interpretation may take. In the first act of Wagner's *The Valkyrie* the content of the interpretation was significant. But, moreover, the locus of the cognitive significance related to interpretation can be located in the actual process through which one comes to understand that content. In this investigation, the distinction between imaginative and imaginary forms of imagination drawn by Dewey proved highly relevant. In chapter four, I argued that due to the important position that the leitmotifs used by Wagner occupy in the first act of his opera, as well as the specific magnetic character

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<sup>402</sup> Davidson (2005/1993, 181).

they possess, the successful interpretation of this piece of music requires the employment of capacities similar to those that are essential for some other important aspects of human life, such as proper moral reflection. The critical investigation of Rorty's views presented in chapter four evolves into an account of interpretation which embraces the kind of pluralistic attitude that Rorty, among others, finds important for our postmetaphysical condition. Simultaneously, it retains a stronger foundation for justification than Rorty's pragmatist view would like to allow. The implication that follows from this is that a commitment to intentionalist principles in interpretation in no way compromises the artwork's potential for realizing those capacities which are connected to the essential values of Rorty's postmetaphysical culture, such as the enhancement of solidarity.

In the introduction, I noted that the issue of relativism is connected to the anti-intentionalist undercurrents which have dominated recent art research. Art researchers have in many cases abandoned the idea of the author's intentions for reasons similar to those that have motivated philosophers to find a way of forming a pluralistic attitude towards the world that can avoid a slippage into relativism. I also noted that it is one of the most important suppositions of this study as a whole that the intentionalist theory of interpretation developed in it on the basis of Davidson's views on meaning, intention, and the holistic constitution of the mind allows one to embrace those aspects of artworks which make them important, for example, to Gadamer and Rorty. Simultaneously, my study attempted to overcome certain problematic features their views have been seen to face, such as to provide a rigorous enough account of validity. The account I offer does, I hope, manage to overcome the relativistic consequences Rorty's and Gadamer's views have been seen to be in danger of falling into. That is, the Davidsonian form of intentionalism shows that we lose very little, even though we commit ourselves to the view that interpretation involves constraints. On the other hand, what we gain is a more rigorous sense of what validity of interpretation ultimately amounts to, and simultaneously, if figures such as Danto and Hirsch are right, we have managed to sustain the intellectual credibility of the interpretive sciences.

This study has investigated other paths, namely Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance, to unite a pluralistic attitude with a strong account of validity. That distinction is important because it raises a question that I believe needs to be more carefully examined within philosophy of interpretation, namely, what is interpretation anyway, and is interpretation really the most important element through which our relationship to artworks is formed? Hirsch's distinction, in fact, seems to suggest that interpretation is only one factor among others in this process. For example, Hirsch himself considers an activity to be "interpretation" which seeks to illuminate the meaning of the work, Hirsch reserving the term "criticism" to denote the process whose goal it is to probe the possible significance of the work.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Hirsch (1967, 57).

Some have already argued that there is a need for a more detailed examination of the role of interpretation in our interaction with the world and how that activity is connected to its neighboring notions, such as understanding. Drawing on pragmatist conceptions of experience and human action Richard Shusterman has, for example, called into question the relationship that is assumed to hold between understanding and interpretation in a tenet which often appears in the hermeneutic literature, “all understanding involves interpretation.” In place of this kind of view, Shusterman offers an account where interpretation is seen as a smaller category compared to understanding, and that there are cases of understanding in which interpretation does not have any role. In Shusterman’s opinion, particularly in cases where understanding is achieved immediately and without conscious reflection, it does not seem meaningful to consider understanding to be a product of interpretation. Rather, in these kinds of cases, understanding is best explained in terms of such factors as habits and customs. To ascribe a role to interpretation in cases of understanding such as these runs the danger of depriving that concept from any kind of clear content, that is, if everything is interpretation, there does not seem to remain a distinct activity for that notion to denote.

Shusterman does not deny that interpretation could have a role in achieving understanding. Rather, the core of his criticism is that only by drawing a distinction between understanding and interpretation does interpretation acquire an appropriate “contrast class” for probing the nature of this activity further, as well as the role it ultimately plays in our lives. One feature which, in Shusterman’s opinion, serves to distinguish understanding from interpretation is that interpretation is a much more conscious activity compared to understanding, this difference between the two activities indicating for Shusterman that interpretation should, in fact, be regarded as a form of “problem solving.”<sup>404</sup>

Investigations like Shusterman’s probe the ultimate role that interpretation has in our lives. What I think has not been considered thoroughly enough is the effect that such investigations have concerning the question how does one reconcile pluralism with a rigid account of validity in interpretation. Together with Hirsch’s distinction between meaning and significance Shusterman’s account of the role of interpretation provides another way of accommodating a pluralist attitude within an intentionalist theory of interpretation. This is because both Hirsch and Shusterman point out a way for the kind of intentionalist theory developed in this study on the basis of Davidson’s views to accept that there are, indeed, differences in the character that people’s relationship to artworks take as well as in the factors through which they are formed, without giving up on the idea that interpretations are constrained by the author’s intentions. That is, intentionalism does not rule out the possibility that two people may legitimately build relationships to artworks which are different from one another, for example in the sense that they experience a given work differently or attribute a different kind of significance to it. What Hirsch’s distinction also points out is that certain

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<sup>404</sup> Shusterman (2000, 129-133).

changes and transformations in the experience a work elicits in oneself and the kind of significance one attributes to it is not, necessarily, a result of a change in one's interpretation. Consequently, it may also be the case that two people hold identical interpretations of a given work but, nevertheless, attribute a different significance to it and experience the work differently. This is because the interpretation one holds of a given work alone does not determine the significance one sees that work to possess, for other factors come into play in determining that aspect of the work, some of which include precisely those factors that have molded us into the kinds of people we are.

This is where Shusterman's and Hirsch's views supplement each another and this exposition also points out why they may both be said to insist on the need for a more detailed examination of the role of interpretation in our interaction not only with artworks, but with the world at large. Simultaneously, by pointing out how multifarious those factors can be through which our relationship to artworks are formed, and how interpretation is only one factor, though in some cases the most essential one, Shusterman's and Hirsch's approaches to philosophy of interpretation also contribute to the attempt to reconcile pluralism with a rigid account of validity in interpretation. That is, to posit constraints on interpretations deriving from the author's intentions does not necessarily mean that one simultaneously introduces definitive constraints on the character that people's relationship to artworks can take. As Hirsch's and Shusterman's views show, interpretation is only one of the ingredients molding that relationship to its ultimate form. Moreover, those other ingredients are not necessarily constrained by the author's intentions in a manner similar to the way interpretations have been considered to be constrained in this study.

In chapter three, I introduced some criticisms that Gadamer's followers and commentators have addressed to the distinction offered by Hirsch, which all tried to show from different angles how the meaning of the work cannot be divorced as razor sharply from the significance the work has for a particular group of people as Hirsch assumes. I presented some remarks in support of the distinction, but I think we are now in a position not only to see why the distinction is warranted, but also how ably it, in fact, manages to capture the different aspects involved in our interactions with artworks.

It is surely the case that when encountering "a great work of art, we bring what we have experienced and who we are into play," as Richard Palmer claims. However, Hirsch's distinction and Shusterman's analysis of interpretation's connection to understanding raises the question why should the effect of the factors which have molded us into the kinds of persons we in actual fact are be extended to concern the way we interpret and understand a given work as straightforwardly as Palmer, for example, assumes?<sup>405</sup> For Hirsch, who we are does, indeed, have an effect on how we interact with artworks, but that primarily concerns the significance we end up seeing in the work, not how we come to interpret it.

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<sup>405</sup> Palmer (1969, 168).

Let me use two examples to extend the point at work here. First, sometimes it seems that interpretation does not play any kind of role in forming the character of our encounter with a particular artwork. For example, my own experience of the first bars of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* is formed through the fact that the so-called Tristan Chord has been widely considered to signify a point in the history of Western classical music in which music broke with the past. My experience, thus, is perhaps infused by a more intense and inconsolable sense of loss than a hearer's in whose experience this historical fact has no kind of role, perhaps because he is unaware of the historical significance of this particular chord developed by Wagner. In this respect, my experience of the piece's beginning is surely different from the way its premiere audience experienced it. But why should this difference in our experiences be explained in terms of differences in the way we interpret and understand the chord in question, whatever that might, ultimately, involve? Is it not, rather, so that due to the place that Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* came to occupy in the history of music, the significance of that chord took on a certain character, which, in turn, partly, explains the differences in the character of my experience on the one hand, and that of the audience's attending its premiere on the other.

Another observation that, in my opinion, supports a more modest view of interpretation's role is that there are cases where our experience does not seem to reflect our understanding of a piece. That is, while those factors raised in hermeneutics do, indeed, have an effect on how we experience a particular work, that experience does not necessarily serve as an indication of our understanding, namely, the kind of interpretation we hold of the piece. Shostakovich's seventh symphony serves as a good case in point. While I think Ian MacDonald is right in drawing attention to the ironic aspects of this symphony,<sup>406</sup> what is interesting is that although I possess this kind of understanding of the work, it is nevertheless nowadays extremely hard for my experience of the work to embody the ironic features the work contains. This is mainly because of the associations and reputation that Shostakovich's work carries which heavily influence the character our relationship to that work nowadays takes. The symphony became a symbol for Soviet defiance during the German siege of Leningrad, an appropriation of the work that was later completely rejected by Shostakovich himself in the controversial work *Testimony*. In that work the composer claims that the symphony did not depict the siege of Leningrad, and that the famous march section of the first movement was not intended as a depiction of the German attack.

Now, despite my experience being heavily colored by these associations, why should the influence resulting from their effect be thought to condition my understanding of the piece in a way that it could no longer be described as being ironic in nature. That is, why should the experience Shostakovich's seventh symphony nowadays elicits in me be thought to serve as a reflection of the content of my understanding of that piece? After all, other features of the work could be pointed out, such as its key being C-major, the similarities obtaining between

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<sup>406</sup> MacDonald (1990, 158).

the symphony's march theme and Ravel's *Bolero*, and certain quotations Shostakovich employs in the piece, which I think explains the work's ironic character. Shouldn't the accuracy of my conception of the work rather be assessed on the basis of whether these factors indeed manage to lend support for the view of the work I hold as opposed to what sorts of features my experience of the work is characterized by?

Be that as it may, in both cases we are left with a kind of pluralism, that is, we can acknowledge that there are differences in the ways people relate to artworks, such as in the significance they attribute to a given work, without giving up on the idea that interpretations are constrained by the author's intentions. This is because the elaboration of Hirsch's distinction offered allows us to say that those differences do not concern differences in interpretation. In this respect, I think Maria Baghramian is absolutely right in insisting that "relativism should be distinguished from pluralism."<sup>407</sup>

I'm gradually beginning to drift away from the original aims and purposes of this study, but, then again, it is not inappropriate to end a study by sketching a new set of questions which writing the study at hand has evoked. It is, of course, somewhat strange to end a study in philosophy of interpretation on a note claiming that interpretation is not necessarily as vital an element in our interaction with art as has been assumed and that we still have not managed to grasp the ultimate content of this concept. However, it seems hard to think otherwise in the face of these observations. Attempting to unravel the logic of the different concepts with which our relationship with artworks can be captured will extend the main topic of this thesis, i.e., the role of the author's intentions in interpretation. It is my belief that that exposition will simultaneously reveal why, in fact, there is nothing to be afraid of in the suggestion that interpretations should be constrained by the author's intentions, for it will indicate how our engagements with artworks are formed through a host of other factors than the process of interpretation.

There is a time for everything, as the Countess notes in *Der Rosenkavalier*, and it would require much more analysis of the complex threads which make up our social and cultural lives, for example the role such factors as customs and habits occupy in them, than I have the possibility of embarking on here before we are in a position to give a more extensive answer to the question when is it time to interpret and when is it time to do something else? When is our successful interaction with the world based on interpretation and when on some other capacities we possess? Time is irreversible, an aspect of our lives *Der Rosenkavalier* portrays in such a heartfelt manner, but, fortunately, the irreversibility of time does not mean that we are nearing the end of time, so unraveling the various threads of the conceptual web our interaction with artworks involves can be left aside for the time being. The time for that investigation will surely come. Now it seems a more rewarding option to take our cue from the Countess again who urges her beloved young lover Octavian to cease philosophizing

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<sup>407</sup> Baghramian (2004, 9).



about the agonies of our lives, such as the inevitable aging of men, and to do something more lighthearted instead, something which requires neither philosophizing nor interpretation.

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